BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NOVELS:

REGIMENT OF WOMEN
FIRST THE BLADE
LEGEND

LONDON WILLIAM HEINEMANN

A BILL OF DIVORCEMENT

A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

BY

CLEMENCE DANE



LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN

This play was produced on Monday, March 14th, 1921, at the St. Martin's Theatre, with the following cast:

MARGARET FAIRFIELD	MISS LILIAN BRAITHWAITE
MISS HESTER FAIRFIELD	MISS AGNES THOMAS
SYDNEY FAIRFIELD	MISS MEGGIE ALBANESI
BASSETT	MISS DOROTHY MARTIN
GRAY MEREDITH	MR. C. AUBREY SMITH
KIT PUMPHREY	MR. IAN HUNTER
HILARY FAIRFIELD	MR. MALCOLM KEEN
DR. ALLIOT	MR. STANLEY LATHBURY
THE REV. CHRISTOPHER PUMPHREY	MR. FEWLASS LLEWELLYN

THE PEOPLE OF THE PLAY

In the order of their appearance.

MARGARET FAIRFIELD.
MISS HESTER FAIRFIELD.
SYDNEY FAIRFIELD.
BASSETT.
GRAY MEREDITH.
KIT PUMPHREY.
HILARY FAIRFIELD.
DR. ALLIOT.
THE CHRISTOPHER.

SCENE.—*A small house in the country. The action passes on Christmas Day, 1933. The audience is asked to imagine that the recommendations of the* Majority Report of the Royal Commission on Divorce *v.* Matrimonial Causes *have become the law of the land.*

ACT I.—THE HALL. MORNING.

ACT II.—THE DRAWING ROOM. EARLY AFTERNOON.

ACT III.—THE HALL. LATE AFTERNOON.

ACT I.

The curtain rises on the hall, obviously used as the common-room of a country house. On the right (of the audience) is the outer door and a staircase that runs down from an upper landing towards the middle of the room, half hiding what has once been a separate smaller room with a baize door at the back. In the corner a French window opens on to a snow-bound garden. On the left, facing the entrance, a log fire is blazing. Staircase, pictures, grandfather clock, etc., are wreathed with holly and mistletoe. At the breakfast table, which is laid for three and littered with paper and string, sit MISS HESTER FAIRFIELD *and* MARGARET FAIRFIELD, *her niece by marriage. The third chair has two or three parcels piled up on it.*

HESTER FAIRFIELD *is one of those twitching, high-minded, elderly ladies in black, who keep a grievance as they might keep a pet dog—as soon as it dies they replace it by another. The grievance of the moment seems to be the empty third chair, and* MARGARET FAIRFIELD *is, as usual, on the defensive. Such a little, pretty,*

helpless-looking woman as MARGARET *has generally half a dozen big sons and a husband to bully; but* MARGARET *has only a daughter, and her way of looking at even the chair on which that daughter ought to be sitting, is the way of a child whose doll has suddenly come to life. For the rest, she is so youthfully anxious and simple and charming that the streak of grey in her hair puzzles you. You wonder what trouble has fingered it. It does not occur to you that she is quite thirty-five.*

MARGARET. [*Apologising*] Yes, she is late.

MISS FAIRFIELD. As usual!

MARGARET. Oh, well, she was dancing till three. I hadn't the heart to wake her.

MISS FAIRFIELD. Till three, was she? Who brought her home?

MARGARET. Kit, of course.

MISS FAIRFIELD. Three o'clock on Christmas morning! I wonder what the Rector said to that.

MARGARET. Oh, Kit's on holiday.

MISS FAIRFIELD. I heard you tell her myself to be in by twelve. If anything could make me approve of this marriage of yours—

MARGARET. Oh, don't begin it again, Auntie!

MISS FAIRFIELD. —it's that the child will have a strong hand over her at last. A step-father's better than nothing—if you can call him a step-father when her father's still alive.

MARGARET. Oh, don't!

MISS FAIRFIELD. What's the use of saying "don't"? He *is* alive. You can't get away from that.

MARGARET. Aunt Hester—*please!*

MISS FAIRFIELD. Well, I'm only telling you—if it's got to be, I'm not sorry it's Gray Meredith.

MARGARET. [*Smiling*] Yes, Sydney knows just how far she may go with Gray.

MISS FAIRFIELD. I see nothing to laugh at in that.

MARGARET. It's so funny to think how circumspect you all are with him. He's the one person I've always felt perfectly safe with. I'd ask anything of Gray.

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Grimly*] You always have, my dear!

MARGARET. I don't know why you should be unkind to me on Christmas morning.

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*With a sort of grudging affection*] I suppose it's because I've only got another week to be unkind to you in.

MARGARET. [*Restlessly*] Oh, I wish you didn't hate it so.

MISS FAIRFIELD. My dear, when you see a person you care for, and she your own nephew's wife, on the brink of deadly sin—

MARGARET. Must we begin it again?

MISS FAIRFIELD. I do my duty. If you'd done yours your daughter wouldn't be late for breakfast, and I shouldn't be given the opportunity.

MARGARET. Perhaps I *had* better call her.

MISS FAIRFIELD. Everything getting cold—and so disrespectful! She ought to be taught.

MARGARET. [*Rising with a sigh*] You're quite right. [*Calling at the foot of the stairs*] Sydney, darling, shall I bring you up your coffee?

SYDNEY'S VOICE. [*Answering*] It's all right, Mother! I'm coming.

MISS FAIRFIELD. And I suppose that's all you'll say.

SYDNEY *comes out of her room. She is physically a bigger, fairer edition of* MARGARET, *but there the likeness ends. Her manner is brisk and decided. She is very sure of herself, but when she loses her temper, as she often does, she loses her aplomb and reveals the schoolgirl. Her attitude to the world is that of justice, untempered, except where her mother is in question, by mercy. But she is very fond of her mother.*

SYDNEY. [*Running down the stairs*] Merry Christmas, everyone! I'm not late, am I? Morning, Auntie! What, no post?

MARGARET. It gets later every year.

MISS FAIRFIELD. I'm very much obliged to you, Sydney, for the—card-case.

SYDNEY. [*Undoing her parcels*] It's a cigarette case, Auntie dear. You see, I thought if you gave me a prayer-book again we might do a deal. Ah,

I thought so! Thanks most awfully. It's sweet of you. Shall we?

MISS FAIRFIELD. What?

SYDNEY. Swop.

MARGARET. Sydney, dear, that's rather rude.

SYDNEY. [*Swiftly*] Well, Mother, I hate being hinted at.

MARGARET. [*Bewildered*] Hint? What hint?

SYDNEY. Oh, Mother, you're such a lamb. You never see anything. [*To* MISS FAIRFIELD] I'm sorry, Auntie, but I'm seventeen, and I've left school, and I am not going to church to-day, or any day any more ever, except to chaperon Mother and Gray next week, bless 'em!

MISS FAIRFIELD. I do think, Margaret, she ought at least to call him Uncle.

MARGARET. Aren't you coming with us to-day, darling? Christmas Day?

SYDNEY. Sorry, Mother. It's against my principles. I refuse to kneel down and say I'm a miserable sinner. I'm not miserable and I'm not a sinner, and I cannot tell a lie to please any old—prayer-book. Besides, I'm expecting Kit.

MISS FAIRFIELD. You'll find that Kit takes his mother to church. *She* hasn't lost all her influence—

SYDNEY. [*Darkly*] She'll be finding herself up against me soon.

MARGARET. [*Like a schoolgirl*] Oh, Sydney, has he—?

SYDNEY. He's trying his hardest to, but I like to sort of *spread* my jam.

MARGARET. Then—then—?

SYDNEY. I'm not actually engaged, if you mean that—[*Watching their faces mischievously*] but I'm going to be.

MISS FAIRFIELD. Engaged at seventeen! Preposterous!

SYDNEY. [*Instantly*] Mother was married at seventeen.

MARGARET. That was the war.

SYDNEY. I don't see what that's got to do with it.

MARGARET. [*Timidly*] Sydney—at seventeen, one doesn't know enough—

SYDNEY. One doesn't know the same things, I dare say.

MARGARET. One doesn't know anything at all.

SYDNEY. Yes, but think of the hopeless sort of world you were seventeen in—even you. As for poor Auntie, as far as knowing things goes—

MARGARET. Sydney, my dear, be good!

SYDNEY. I am being good. I'm returning hint for hint.

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Ruffling*] Is this the way you let your daughter speak to me, Margaret?

SYDNEY. [*Closing with her*] You see, she doesn't enjoy being hinted at either.

MARGARET. [*Between the upper and the nether mill-stone*] I don't know what you mean, Sidney, but *don't*!

SYDNEY. I mean that I'm not going to let Aunt Hester interfere in my affairs like she does in yours. That's what I mean.

MISS FAIRFIELD. These are the manners they teach you at your fine school, I suppose!

SYDNEY. Never mind, Auntie, I've had my lessons in the holidays too. You needn't think I haven't watched the life you've led Mother over this divorce business.

MARGARET. [*Distressed at the discussion*] Sydney! Sydney!

SYDNEY. [*Remorselessly*] Well, hasn't she? What prevented you from marrying Gray ages ago? Father's been out of his mind long enough, poor man! You knew you were free to be free. You knew you were making Gray miserable and yourself miserable—and yet, though that divorce law has been in force for years, it's taken you all this time to fight your scruplos. At least, you call them scruples! What you really mean is Aunt Hester and her prayer book. And now, when you have at last consented to give yourself a chance of being happy—when it's Christmas Day and you're going to be married at New Year—still you let Aunt Hester sit at your own breakfast table and insult you with talk about deadly sin. It's no use pretending you didn't Auntie, because Mother left my door open and I heard you.

MARGARET. [*With a certain dignity*] Sydney, I can take care of myself.

SYDNEY [*Oblivious of it*] Take care of yourself! As if everybody didn't ride rough-shod over you when I'm not there.

MARGARET. Yes, but my pet, you musn't break out like this. Of course your aunt knows you don't really mean to be rude—

SYDNEY. I do mean to be rude to her when she's rude to you.

MARGARET. My dear, you quite misunderstand your aunt.

SYDNEY. Oh, no, I don't, Mother! [MARGARET *shrugs her shoulders helplessly and sits down on the sofa to the left of the fireplace.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Rising*] I'm afraid you'll have to go to church without me, Margaret. I'm thoroughly upset. You've brought up your daughter to ignore me, and I know why. I'm the wrong side of the family. I'm the one person in this house who remembers poor Hilary. I shall read the service in the drawing-room. [*She goes out.*]

SYDNEY. [*Looking after her*] She owes me something. She's been dying for an excuse, with that cold. [*She turns to the sofa and says more gently*] What's the use of crying, Mother? If Gray finds out there'll be a row, and then Aunt Hester'll be sorry she ever was born.

MARGARET. It isn't that. You get so excited, Sydney! You remind me—your father was so excitable. I don't like to see it.

SYDNEY. I'm not really. I needn't let myself go if I don't want to.

MARGARET. You musn't get impatient with your aunt. She can't get accustomed to the new ways, that's all. I—I can't myself, sometimes. [*Restlessly*] I hope I'm doing right.

SYDNEY. Oh, I do think it's morbid to have a conscience. If Father had been dead fifteen years, would you say, "I hope I'm doing right"? And he *is* dead. His mind's dead. You know you've done all you can. And you're frightfully in love with Gray—

MARGARET. [*Flushing*] Don't, Sydney!

SYDNEY. Well, you are, and so he is with you. So what's the worry about? Aunt Hester! What people like Aunt Hester choose to think! I call it morbid.

MARGARET. [*Whimsically*] I suppose I haven't brought you up properly. Your aunt's quite right!

SYDNEY. Yes. That's what it always comes back to. "Your aunt's quite right!" I can argue with you by the hour—

MARGARET. [*Hastily*] Oh, not this morning, darling, will you?

SYDNEY. —and Gray can argue with you by the hour—

MARGARET. [*Smiling*] Ah, but he never does.

SYDNEY. —and you pretend to agree with us; but underneath your common sense, your mind's really thinking—"Your aunt's quite right!"

MARGARET. She stands for the old ways, Sydney.

SYDNEY. She stands for Noah and the flood. She'd no business to go dragging up Father and the divorce on Christmas morning to upset you.

MARGARET. It wasn't your aunt.

SYDNEY. Then it was me, I suppose! "If I could only control my tongue and my temper," and all the rest of it!

MARGARET. [*Quietly*] No, it was about Kit.

SYDNEY. Kit? Oh, that's all right, Mother. Don't you worry about me and Kit.

MARGARET. I do.

SYDNEY. You needn't.

MARGARET. [*Shyly*] You see, I thought I was in love at seventeen, too.

SYDNEY. Oh, but I quite know what I'm doing.

MARGARET. And now I know I didn't know much about it. I don't want you to be—rushed.

SYDNEY. Nobody could make me do what I didn't want to do.

MARGARET. [*Forgetting* SYDNEY] It was nobody's fault. It was the war— [*She sits, dreaming.*]

SYDNEY. Its extraordinary to me—whenever you middle-aged people want to excuse yourselves for anything you've done that you know you oughtn't to have done, you say it was the war. How could a war make you get married if you didn't want to?

MARGARET. [*Groping for words*] It was the feel in the air. They say the smell of blood sends horses crazy. That was the feel. One did mad

things. Hilary—your father—he was going out—the trenches—to be hurt. And he was so fond of me he frightened me. I was so sorry. I thought I cared. Can't you understand?

SYDNEY. No. Either you care or you don't.

MARGARET. [*Passionately*] How can you know until it happens to you? How was I to know there was more to it than keeping house and looking after Hilary—and you? How was I to know?

SYDNEY. [*Doubtfully*] Is there so much more to it?

MARGARET. Yes.

SYDNEY. I don't believe there is for some people. Why it's just what I want—to look after Kit and a house of my own, and—oh, at least half a dozen kids.

MARGARET. [*Uncomfortably*] Sydney, *dear!*

SYDNEY. Oh, Kit's as keen as I am on eugenics, He's doing a paper for his debating society.

MARGARET. Well, I found you quite enough to manage,

SYDNEY. [*Leaning over the back of the sofa*] I believe you were scared of me when I was little—[*Margaret nods*] and even now—

MARGARET. [*Quickly*] What?

SYDNEY. [*Quite good humoured about it*] Well, if you had to choose between me and Gray, it wouldn't be Gray who'd lose you.

MARGARET. [*Confronted with the idea*] I hope I'd do what's right.

SYDNEY. [*Airily*] There you are!

MARGARET. [*As it goes home*] It's not true. You've no right to make me out a heartless mother. But—

SYDNEY (*Her arm round her mother's neck*] Well—heartless Mother?

MARGARET. [*Clutching at the arm*] Oh, Sydney—what should I do if Gray—if Gray—

SYDNEY. It's all right, Mother! [*There is the sound of a motor driving up.*] There is Gray.

MARGARET. [*Jumping up hurriedly*] Oh, and I'm not dressed. Say I'll be down in a minute. [*She runs upstairs.*]

SYDNEY. You've plenty of time. The bells haven't begun yet.

MARGARET. [*From the gallery*] Tell Bassett to clear away.

SYDNEY *rings the bell. The elderly maid enters through the baize door.*

BASSETT. Yes, Miss?

SYDNEY. You can clear, Bassett!

While she is speaking GRAY MEREDITH *comes in through the hall door. He is about forty, tall, dark and quiet, very sure of himself, and quite indifferent to the effect he makes on other people. As he is a man who never has room in his head for more than one idea at a time, and as for the last five years that idea has been* MARGARET,

the rest of the world doesn't get much out of him. But mention her and he behaves exactly like a fire being poked.

GRAY. [*Putting down a box he carries*] Where's your mother?

SYDNEY. [*Folding her hands*] Good morning, dear Sydney! A merry Christmas to you, and so many thanks for the tie that, with the help of your devoted aunt, you so thoughtfully—

GRAY. Stop it, there's a good child! I haven't missed her, have I?

SYDNEY. Pray accept in return as a small token of esteem and total dependency—

GRAY. I asked you if your mother had started.

SYDNEY. [*In her natural voice*] It's true, you know. You simply daren't cope with me yet.

GRAY. [*Twinkling in spite of himself*] Hm! A time will come—

SYDNEY. Wouldn't it warm the cockles of Aunt Hester's heart to hear you! What are cockles, Gray? Gray, she says I ought to call you Uncle! Gray, d'you think you have brought me what I think you have for a Christmas present?

GRAY. You'd better go and look. It's in the motor with Kit.

SYDNEY. It?

GRAY. He.

SYDNEY. By Viscount out of Vixen?

GRAY. Really, Sydney!

SYDNEY. Dear Uncle Hester!

GRAY. Yes, but Sydney—?

SYDNEY. [*At the door*] Oh, didn't I tell you? Mother says she'll be down in a minute. [*She lets in the sound of the church bells as she goes out.*]

GRAY *walks about the room, then, going to the foot of the staircase, he calls softly.*

GRAY. Margaret! [*He waits a moment: then he calls again*] Margaret!

He listens, takes another turn about the room, then, coming back to the staircase, stands, leaning against the foot of the balusters. MARGARET *comes softly down the stairs, and bending over, puts her hands on his shoulders.*

MARGARET. A merry Christmas!

GRAY. [*Turning round and kissing her*] And a happy New Year!

MARGARET. It will be—oh, it will be!

GRAY. I almost think it will sometimes. [*Holding her at arms' length*] New frock?

MARGARET. Like it?

GRAY. Oh, I've seen it already.

MARGARET. Why, it's the first time I've put it on.

GRAY. [*Untying the box on the table as he speaks*] Sydney carted it along with her last week when we went to choose—this.

MARGARET. [*Like a child with a new toy*] For me, Gray?

GRAY. Looks like it.

MARGARET. Oh, I hope you haven't been extravagant.

GRAY. [*Opening the lid*] Well, Sydney said—

MARGARET. Silver fox! Oh, my dear, you shouldn't.

GRAY. Put 'em on. Sydney's quite a wise child.

MARGARET. [*Luxuriously*] Oh, I do love being spoiled.

GRAY. You haven't had so much of it, have you, Meg?

MARGARET. [*With a complete change of manner* Don't!

GRAY. What?

MARGARET. Don't call me Meg.

GRAY. Why not?

MARGARET. You never have before.

GRAY. Don't you see, I want a name for you that no-one else uses.

MARGARET. [*Close to him*] Yes, yes, that no-one else has ever used. Not Meg. Not Margaret, Make a name of your own for me—new—new.

GRAY. Well, you're getting one new name pretty soon, anyhow.

MARGARET. Yes. New year—new name—new life. [*In his arms*] Oh, Gray, is thirty-five very old?

GRAY. Not when you say it.

MARGARET. Oh, Gray, we've time for everything still?

GRAY. Time for everything. [*He laughs*] Except church, my child! Do you really insist on going?

MARGARET. Aunt Hester will be horrified if I don't. Besides— [*She comes back to the table and begins putting the papers together.*]

GRAY. What?

MARGARET. I suppose you'll think me a fool—

GRAY. Shall I?

MARGARET. Oh, Gray, for the first time in my life I'm happy. I want to say—

GRAY. What does she want to say?

MARGARET. "Humble and hearty thanks—"

SYDNEY *runs in with a puppy in her arms. She is followed by* KIT. KIT *is a good-looking, fair-haired boy who may be twenty-two, but is nevertheless much younger than* SYDNEY, *whom he takes as seriously as he takes everything else in life. It is part of her charm for him that he finds it a little difficult to keep up with her.*

SYDNEY. Mother! Mother! Look what Gray's brought me!

MARGARET. Oh, Sydney, your aunt isn't fond of dogs. Merry Christmas, Kit!

KIT. Merry Christmas, Mrs. Fairfield!

SYDNEY. Yes, but isn't he an angel? And Kit's given me a collar for him. [*She goes up to* GRAY]

You know, Gray, it's so sweet of you that in return I'll—

GRAY. Well?

SYDNEY. [*Conspiratorially*] Make Kit late for church if you like.

GRAY. [*Putting himself in her hands*] I did promise him a lift.

SYDNEY. [*Settling it*] He can cut across the fields. [*Aloud*] Kit, what about a bone for the angel? You might go and make love to Bassett. [*She puts the dog into his arms. They stroll off together into the inner room.*]

KIT. [*Earnestly, as he goes out through the baize door*] He ought to be kept to biscuits.

SYDNEY. [*Calling to him*] Just one to gnaw. [*Then, over her shoulder*] Mother, the bells have been going quite a while.

MARGARET. [*To* GRAY] Listen, don't you love them?

GRAY. Church bells?

MARGARET. Wedding bells.

GRAY. Margaret, you've stepped straight out of a Trollope novel.

MARGARET. [*Flushing*] I suppose you think I'm sentimental.

GRAY. No, but you're pure nineteenth century.

MARGARET. I'm not. [*Telephone bell rings*] Oh!

GRAY. There goes the twentieth. Don't you see how it makes you jump?

SYDNEY *has gone to the telephone.*

SYDNEY. Hullo! Hullo! . . . You rang *me* up. [*She hangs up the receiver*] "Sorry you have been trubbled!" And it's sure to be someone trying to get on.

GRAY. On Christmas morning? Hardly! I say, come along! The bells have stopped.

MARGARET. [*In a strange voice*] Yes, they stopped when that other bell rang.

SYDNEY. Why, Mother, what's the matter?

MARGARET. [*Blindly*] They stopped.

SYDNEY. I told you, darling, you're late.

MARGARET. Give me my furs. I'm cold. [GRAY *helps her on with them.*]

SYDNEY. [*Proud of her*] They *are* lovely.

MARGARET. [*At the door, wistfully*] It isn't too good to be true, is it?

GRAY. The furs?

MARGARET. Everything! You—oh, what a fool I am! [*You hear* GRAY'S *laugh answering hers as they go out together, and the sound of the motor driving away.*]

SYDNEY. [*Subsiding on to the sofa, to* KIT, *who has come in as the others go*] I thought they'd never get off. Mother has a way of standing around and gently fussing—I tell you I'll be glad when next week's over.

KIT. So'll I. I haven't had a look in lately.

SYDNEY. [*With an intimate glance*] Not last night? But it *has* been a job, running Mother. I'm bridesmaid and best man and family lawyer and

Juliet's nurse all rolled into one—and a sort of lightning conductor for Aunt Hester into the bargain. That's why I've had so little time for you. It's quite true what Gray was saying just now—Mother *is* nineteenth century. She's sweet and helpless, but she's obstinate too. My word, the time she took making up her mind to get that divorce!

KIT. It's just about that that I've been wanting to talk to you. You see—

SYDNEY. Well?

KIT. You see—

SYDNEY. Hurry up, old thing!

KIT. Well, you see, when I got home last night the governor was sitting up for me.

SYDNEY. He would be.

KIT. And in the course of the row—*you* came in to it.

SYDNEY. Oh, but he likes me.

KIT. Yes, he was quite soothed when I said we were engaged.

SYDNEY. Liar!

KIT. [*Serenely*] Oh, well—

SYDNEY. [*She finds his chuckle infectious*] What did he say?

KIT. Oh, lots of rot, of course, about being too young. But he was quite bucked really until—

SYDNEY. Well?

KIT. Well, I was a fool. I said something, quite by chance, about your father. Then the fur began

to fly. You see, it seems he thought your mother was a widow—

SYDNEY. [*Ruffling up*] What's it got to do with him?

KIT. Well, you see—

SYDNEY. If you'd only make me see instead of you-seeing me all the time.

KIT. I'm afraid of hurting your feelings.

SYDNEY. I'm not nineteenth century.

KIT. [*Desperately*] Well, my people are.

SYDNEY. Well?

KIT. That's the trouble—my people are! Father promptly began about not seeing his way to—

SYDNEY. To what, Kit?

KIT. To—to marrying them.

SYDNEY. But I've never heard of anything so crazy.

KIT. Of course, you know, there's nothing to worry about. There are heaps of clergymen who will.

SYDNEY. My dear boy, if Mother isn't married in her own parish church she'll think she's living in sin.

KIT. Well, there it is!

SYDNEY. But look here, the old rector knew all about it. Do you mean to say that a new man can come into our parish and insult Mother just because his beastly conscience doesn't work the same way the old rector's did? The divorce is perfectly legal.

KIT. [*In great discomfort*] Yes, Father knows all

that. [*Hopefully*] Of course, I don't see myself why a registry office—

SYDNEY. If it were me I'd prefer it. Much less fuss. But Mother wouldn't.

KIT. But she ought to see—

SYDNEY. But she won't. It's no use reckoning on what people ought to be. You've got to deal with them as they are.

KIT. [*Guiltily*] Well, I'm awfully sorry.

SYDNEY. It's no use being sorry. We've got to do something.

KIT. [*Hopelessly*] When once the old man gets an idea into his head—

SYDNEY. He'd better not let it out in front of Mother. Gray'd half kill him if he did. And I tell you this, Kit, what Gray leaves I'll account for, even if he is your father. Poor little Mother!

KIT. Well I'm all on your side, you know that. But of course, Sydney, a clergyman needn't re-marry divorced people. It's in that bill. The governor was quoting it to-day.

SYDNEY. But doesn't he know the circumstances.

KIT. He only knows what I do.

SYDNEY. One doesn't shout things at people, naturally. But it's nothing to be ashamed of. It's only that my unfortunate father has been in an asylum ever since I can remember. Shell-shock. It began before I was born. He never came home again. Mother had to give up going to see him even. It seemed to make him worse.

KIT. Pretty tragic.

SYDNEY. Oh, for years now he hasn't known anyone, luckily. And he's well looked after. He's quite all right.

KIT. [*Uncomfortably*] You're a queer girl.

SYDNEY. But he is.

KIT. Yes—but—

SYDNEY. What?

KIT. Your own father—

SYDNEY. [*Impatiently*] My dear boy, I've never even seen him. Oh, of course it's very sad, but I can't go about with my handkerchief to my eyes all the time, can I?

KIT. Yes—but—

SYDNEY. I hate cant.

KIT. [*Leaning over the back of the sofa, his hands playing with her chain*] You little brute—you're as hard as nails, aren't you?

SYDNEY. [*Putting up her face to him*] Am I? [*They kiss.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Passing through*] Really Sydney! Before lunch!

KIT. You know, old thing, sometimes I don't feel as if I should ever really get on with your aunt.

SYDNEY. [*Dimpling*] You'll have to if—

KIT. Good Lord! You don't want her in the house!

SYDNEY. [*Calmly*] I must take her off Mother sometimes. That's only fair. But she shan't worry you.

KIT. I say, you're going to have things your own way, aren't you?

SYDNEY. But of course I am, darling.

KIT. [*Heavily*] But look here—marriage is a sort of mutual show, isn't it? We've got to pull together.

SYDNEY. Of course.

KIT. But suppose we come to a cross-roads, so to speak?

SYDNEY. Well, somebody'll have to give way, won't they, darling?

KIT. Hm!

SYDNEY. My dear boy, if you want a door-mat you'd better look out for someone—someone like poor dear Mother, for instance.

KIT. [*Wiser than he knows*] But you *are* like her, Sydney!

SYDNEY. Me? Do you think I'd let my daughter run me the way I run Mother? Not much!

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Re-entering*] I think I left my—[*murmurs*].

SYDNEY. [*Aside*] It's no good. She's doing this on purpose because I cheeked her. You'd better go, old man. Besides, they must be well through the anthem.

KIT. [*Disturbed*] Good Lord! I should think I had better go!

SYDNEY. [*Going with him to the door*] I say, keep your father quiet till I've had time to talk to Gray.

KIT. Right! [*He goes out.*]

SYDNEY. [*Calling*] Kit!

Kit. [*Reappearing*] Yes?

SYDNEY. Come round in the afternoon.

KIT. Right! [*He goes out.*]

SYDNEY. [*Calling*] Kit!

KIT. [*Reappearing*] Yes?

SYDNEY. I don't suppose there'll ever be any cross-roads.

KIT. Darling! [*A scuffle.* SYDNEY *reappears patting her hair.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD. I'm afraid I disturbed a *tête-à-tête.*

SYDNEY. [*Sweetly*] Oh, Auntie, whatever made you think that?

MISS FAIRFIELD. But I really could'nt sit in the drawing-room. There's no fire. [*She sits down and opens her book*].

SYDNEY. [*In a soft little voice, hums*] "When we are married we'll have sausages for tea."

MISS FAIRFIELD. Do you mind being quiet while I read the service?

SYDNEY. Sorry! [*She takes up some knitting.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD. What are you doing?

SYDNEY. Tie for Kit.

MISS FAIRFIELD. Sydney! Needlework on Sunday!

SYDNEY. Well, I can't sit in the drawing-room either if there's no fire.

MISS FAIRFIELD. There's no need to lose your temper.

SYDNEY. [*Out of patience*] Here, I'm going. [*As she makes for the staircase the telephone gives a broken tinkle.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD. Sydney, I believe that telephone's going off!

SYDNEY. Yes, I'm sure it's someone trying to get on. They've rung up once already.

MISS FAIRFIELD. Sydney, I won't be left to deal with it. [*The telephone rings deafeningly.*] There, I told you so.

SYDNEY. Well, it's not my fault! [*She takes off the receiver*] Hullo! Hullo! . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . [*To her aunt*] It's a trunk call.

MISS FAIRFIELD. Who on earth—?

SYDNEY. Yes . . . Hullo! . . . Yes . . . Mrs. Fairfield's out. Shall I take a message? . . . This is Miss Fairfield speaking . . . All right, I'll hold on . . . [*To her aunt*] Auntie, it's from Bedford. It's about Father. [*Into the telephone*] Yes . . . This is Miss Fairfield speaking . . . What? . . . Good Lord!

MISS FAIRFIELD. Sydney, don't say "Good Lord"!

SYDNEY. But you should have let Mrs. Fairfield know! . . . Only this morning? Oh, I see . . . No, we've heard nothing. When did you find out? . . . What makes you—? I see . . . No, he's not here . . . Of course we'd let you know . . . Then you'll let us know at once if anything . . .

yes . . . *Miss* Fairfield. Mrs. Fairfield is going away very soon . . . Thank you . . . Good-bye.

SYDNEY *hangs up the receiver and turns round.*

MISS FAIRFIELD. Well?

SYDNEY. Father's got away.

MISS FAIRFIELD. What? Who spoke to you?

SYDNEY. The head man—what's his name? Rogers! Frightfully upset.

MISS FAIRFIELD. I should think so. Why, the poor fellow's dangerous.

SYDNEY. Apparently he's been very much better lately, and this last week, a marked change, he says.

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Agitated*] You mean he's getting well?

SYDNEY. Looks like it. Rogers was awfully guarded but—apparently they'd already written to Uncle Hugh and the solicitors.

MISS FAIRFIELD. They ought to have written to me.

SYDNEY. Of course, they wouldn't write to Mother—now—but we ought to have heard.

MISS FAIRFIELD. When did they miss him?

SYDNEY. This morning. Then a lot about its being inexplicable and the precautions they had taken and so on. The fact remains that he has managed to get away.

MISS FAIRFIELD. It's disgraceful carelessness.

SYDNEY. Their theory is that he has suddenly

come to himself. Is it possible, Auntie? Can it happen?

MISS FAIRFIELD. It's quite possible. It does. It was the same with my poor sister, Grace. After ten years that was.

SYDNEY. But the doctors said incurable.

MISS FAIRFIELD. The Almighty's greater than the doctors. And nerves—nerves are queer things. I nursed your Aunt Grace. Well, I always told your mother to wait.

SYDNEY. [*Struck*] Is that a fact about Aunt Grace? Was she out of her mind too?

MISS FAIRFIELD. She never had to be sent away.

SYDNEY. Nobody ever told me.

MISS FAIRFIELD. There's something in most families.

SYDNEY. But with Father—wasn't it shell-shock?

MISS FAIRFIELD. It was brought on by shell-shock.

SYDNEY. D'you mean that in our family there's insanity?

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Fidgeting*] That's not the way to talk. But we're nervy, all of us, we're nervy. Your poor father would have been no worse than the rest if it hadn't been for the war.

SYDNEY. [*Slowly*] What do you mean, "nervy"?

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*With a sidelong glance*] I mean the way you're taking this.

SYDNEY. [*Sharply*] How am I taking it?

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Irritated*] Well, look at you now.

SYDNEY. [*Coldly*] I'm perfectly under control.

MISS FAIRFIELD. That's it. It's not natural.

SYDNEY. [*Slowly*] You mean, I shouldn't bother to control myself if—

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Hastily*] You're too young to think about such things.

SYDNEY. —if I weren't afraid, you mean. Did Mother know—when she married?

MISS FAIRFIELD. I tell you there are troubles in every family, but one doesn't talk about them.

SYDNEY. But did she *know* the trouble was insanity?

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Shortly*] I don't know.

SYDNEY. Did Father?

MISS FAIRFIELD. One always knows in a general sort of way.

SYDNEY. [*Relentlessly*] Am I nervy?

MISS FAIRFIELD. Young people don't have nerves.

SYDNEY. Insanity! A thing you can hand on! And I told Kit it was shell-shock!

MISS FAIRFIELD. I don't see what difference it makes to Christopher.

SYDNEY. You don't see what difference—? You don't see—? [*To herself*] But *I* see [*There is a pause*] Aunt Hester, suppose Father really gets well—?

MISS FAIRFIELD. Well?

SYDNEY. Whatever will he do?

MISS FAIRFIELD. It's a question of what your mother will do.

SYDNEY. But it won't have anything to do with Mother.

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Grimly*] Won't it?

SYDNEY. What on earth are you driving at?

MISS FAIRFIELD. I can't discuss it with you.

SYDNEY. Why not?

MISS FAIRFIELD. You're too young.

SYDNEY. I'm old enough to be engaged.

MISS FAIRFIELD. You're not engaged.

SYDNEY. [*Insolently*] Kissed then. You saw that half an hour ago, didn't you? I might just as well say I can't discuss it with you because you're too old.

MISS FAIRFIELD. How dare you speak to me like that?

SYDNEY. [*Beside herself*] Oh, are all old people such stone walls? Here's a shadow, here's a trouble, here's a ghost in the house—and when I ask you what shall I do, you talk about your blessed dignity!

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Rising*] This is the second time in one morning that you have driven me out of the room.

SYDNEY [*Wringing her hands*] Well, I'm sorry! But I'm so worried. Don't you see I've got to keep it off Mother? and Kit! Oh, I've got to tell Kit! [*Following her irresolutely*] Auntie, if you'd only be decent [*But* MISS FAIRFIELD *has gone out.* SYDNEY *turns back into the room*] If I only knew what to do!

She stands hesitating. Then she goes to the telephone: makes a movement as if to take it down but checks herself, shaking her head. She comes back to the sofa at last and flings herself down on it, fidgeting with the cushions and frowning. She is roused by the click of a latch as the French window in the inner room is softly opened, and HILARY FAIRFIELD *steps over the threshold. He is a big, fresh-coloured man with grey hair and bowed shoulders. In speech and movements he is quick and jerky, inclined to be boisterous, but pathetically easy to check. This he knows himself, and he has, indeed, an air of being always in rebellion against his own habit of obedience. He comes in, treading softly, his bright eyes dancing with excitement, like a child getting ready to spring a surprise on somebody. Something in the fashion of the empty room (for he does not see* SYDNEY *crouching in the cushions) disconcerts him. He hesitates. The happy little smile fades. His eye wanders from one object to another and he moves about, recognising a picture here, fingering there an unfamiliar hanging, as it were losing and finding himself a dozen times in his progress round the room. He comes to a stand at last before the fire-place, warming his hands. Then he takes out a pipe and with the other*

hand feels absently along the mantel-piece for the matches. SYDNEY, *who has been watching him with a sort of breathless sympathy, says softly :—*

SYDNEY What are you looking for?

HILARY, They've moved my—[*with a start*] eh? [*He turns sharply and sees her*] Meg! It's Meg! [*With a rush*] Oh, my own darling!

SYDNEY. [*Her confidence in her power to deal with the situation suddenly gone*] I—I'm not Meg.

HILARY. [*Boisterously*] Not Meg! Tell me I don't know Meg! [SYDNEY *gives a nervous schoolgirl giggle*] Eh? [*Then, his voice changing completely*] No, it's not Meg. [*Uneasily*] I beg your pardon. I thought you were—another girl. I've been away a long time.

SYDNEY. Whom do you want?

HILARY. [*Startled again*] There, you see, it's her voice too. Who are you?

SYDNEY. [*Fencing*] How did you get in.

HILARY. Tool-shed gate. [*Louder*] Who are you?

SYDNEY. Where have you come from?

HILARY. Bedford. Took a car. [*Lashing himself into an agitation*] Who are you?

SYDNEY. Whom do you want to see?

HILARY. [*Losing all control*] Who are you?

SYDNEY. [*Slowly*] I think I'm your daughter. [HILARY *stares at her blankly. Then he bursts out laughing.*]

HILARY. Daughter! Daughter! By God, that's good! My wife isn't my wife, she's my daughter! And my daughter's seventeen and I'm twenty-two.

SYDNEY. You're forgetting what years and years—

HILARY. Yes, of course. It's years and years. It's a life-time. It's my daughter's lifetime. What's your name—daughter?

SYDNEY. Sydney.

HILARY. Sydney. Sydney, eh? My mother was Sydney. I like Sydney. I—[*catching at his dignity*] I suppose we're rather a shock to each other—Sydney.

SYDNEY. No. You're not a shock to me. But I'm afraid—

HILARY. [*Breaking in*] Is my—? Is your—? Where's Margaret?

SYDNEY. At church.

HILARY. Back soon, eh?

SYDNEY. Yes, that's why I'm afraid—

HILARY. [*Unheeding*] I might go to meet her, eh?

SYDNEY. [*Quickly*] Oh, I wouldn't. Come and sit down and wait for her and talk.

HILARY. [*Obediently*] Very well. [*He sits down beside her on the sofa. They look at each other. He says shyly*] I say, isn't this queer?

SYDNEY. It makes me want to cry.

HILARY. Why? That's all over. Laugh! Laugh! That's the thing to do. What a lovely room this is! I can't say I like the new paper—or the curtains!

SYDNEY. [*Quickly*] Yes, I liked the old red ones, too. [*Then, with an effort*] Those—aren't—the only changes. Everything changes—

HILARY. [*Swiftly*] Bet you Aunt Hester hasn't, eh? [*They look at each other and laugh.*] And I bet you—I say, is your mother such a darling still?

SYDNEY. [*Recalled to the business before her, brusquely*] Look here—Father—

HILARY. [*Savouring it*] "Father!" "Father!" Well?

SYDNEY. We've got to talk. We've got to get things straight before she comes back.

HILARY. [*His eye and his attention beginning to wander*] Back soon, eh? Why has Meg moved the clock? It was much better where we put it. Must get it put back. Nearly one. She's late, isn't she? I—I really think, you know, I'll go out and meet your mother.

SYDNEY. [*Authoritatively*] You're to stay here.

HILARY. [*Beginning obediently*] Very well—[*He flares suddenly*] I'll do as I like about that.

SYDNEY. [*Passionately*] I'll not have you frighten her.

HILARY. I? [*He smiles securely.*]

SYDNEY. Can't you realise what the shock—?

HILARY. [*Blissfully*] Never known anyone die of joy yet!

SYDNEY. Father, you don't understand! You and mother—

HILARY. [*Getting irritated*] Look here, this is nothing to do with you—

SYDNEY. But you mustn't—

HILARY [*Violently*] Now I tell you I'm not going to be hectored. I won't stand it. I've had enough of it. D'you hear? I've had enough of it.

SYDNEY. If you talk to my mother like this—

HILARY. [*Softening*] Meg understands.

SYDNEY [*Jealously*] So do I understand.

HILARY. I believe you do. You got wild all in a moment. That's my way, too. It means nothing. Meg can't see that it means nothing. But it makes a man wild, you know, to be dragooned when he's as sane as—my God, I *am* sane! That's all over, isn't it? I am sane. Daughter!

SYDNEY. [*Watching him*] Father?

HILARY. Don't let me get—that way. It's bad. Help me to go slow. I'm as well as you are, you know. But it's new. It only happened to-day—like a curtain lifting. [*Confidentially*] You see I was standing in the garden—

SYDNEY. I can't conceive how you got away.

HILARY. Led. Like Peter out of prison. I went through the gate, openly. Their eyes were blinded. [*With a complete change of tone*] Pure luck, you know. There were visitors going out—and I nipped along with them, talking. No-one spotted me. I wouldn't have believed it possible. Heaps of us—of them, I mean—have tried, you know.

SYDNEY. But you'd no money.

HILARY. [*Whimsically*] I took the first taxi I saw. Promised him double. He's at the lower gate now, waiting to be paid.

SYDNEY. Father, *dear!* Ticking away the tuppences! We're not millionaires!

HILARY. [*Carelessly*] Your mother'll see to it. [*Sound of a motor horn*] That's him! I suppose he's got tired of waiting and come round.

SYDNEY. No, no! That'll be Mother. You mustn't stop here. You must let me tell her. You must let me tell her first. [*She goes out hurriedly.*]

HILARY. Your mother, is it? Your mother, eh? Here—child—a minute, give me a minute! give me a minute!

MARGARET. [*As she comes in*] No—he couldn't. But he's coming round directly after lunch—Hilary!

HILARY. [*Like a man who can't see*] Meg! Is it Meg? Meg, I've come home.

MARGARET. [*Terrified*] Sydney, don't go away!

SYDNEY. It's all right, Mother!

HILARY. Meg!

MARGARET. But they said—they said—incurable. They shouldn't have said—incurable.

HILARY. What does it matter? I'm well. I'm well, Meg! I tell you—it came over me like a lantern flash—like a face turning to you. I was in the garden, you know—lost. I was a lost soul—outcast! No hope. I can never make anyone

understand. I was never like the rest of them. I was sane, always—but—the face was turned away.

SYDNEY. What face?

HILARY. The face of God.

MARGARET. Sydney—is he—?

SYDNEY.—It's all right, Mother! That isn't madness. He's come to himself.

MARGARET. Then—then—what am I to do?

HILARY. What's that? [*He comes nearer.*]

MARGARET. I—I—

HILARY. [*Staring at her*] You don't say a word. One would think you weren't glad to see me. Aren't you glad to see me?

MARGARET. Of course—glad—you poor Hilary!

HILARY. If you knew what it is to say to myself—I'm at home! That place—!

MARGARET. [*Mechanically*] Oh, but there was every comfort.

HILARY. Hell! Hell!

MARGARET. [*Insisting*] But they were good to you?

HILARY. Good enough.

MARGARET. [*In acute distress*] They didn't—ill-treat—?

SYDNEY. Mother, you know you did the very best—

HILARY. If it had been heaven—what difference does it make? I was a dead man. Do you know what the dead do in heaven? They sit on their

golden chairs and sicken for home. Why did you never come?

MARGARET. They wouldn't let me. It made you worse.

HILARY. Because I wanted you so.

MARGARET. But you didn't know me.

HILARY. My voice didn't—and my speech and my actions didn't. But *I* knew you. Meg—behind the curtain—behind the dreams and the noises, and the abandonment of God—I wanted you. I wanted—I wanted— [*He puts his hand to his head.*] Look here—I tell you we mustn't talk of these things. It's not safe, I tell you. When I talk I see a black hand reaching up through the floor—do you see? there—through the widening crack of the floor—to catch me by the ankle and drag—drag—

SYDNEY. Father—Father—go slow!

MARGARET. [*Terrified*] Sydney!

SYDNEY, It's all right, Mother! We'll manage.

HILARY. [*Turning to her*] Yes, you tell your mother. I'm all right! You understand that, don't you? Once it was a real hand. Now I know it's in my mind. I tell you, Meg, I'm well. But it's not safe to think about anything but— Oh, my dear, the holly and the crackle of the fire and the snow like a veil of peace on me—and you like the snow—so still—

He comes to her with outstretched arms.

MARGARET [*Faint*] No—no—no—

HILARY. [*Exalted*] Yes—yes—yes! [*He catches her to him.*]

MARGARET. For pity's sake, Hilary—!

BASSETT. [*Entering*] Lunch is served, Ma'am!

MARGARET. [*Helplessly*] Sydney?

SYDNEY. Lay an extra cover. This—my—this gentleman is staying to lunch.

HILARY. [*Boisterously*] Staying to lunch! to lunch! That's a good joke, isn't it? I say, listen! I'm laughing. Do you know, I'm laughing? It's blessed to laugh. Staying to lunch! Yes, my girl! Lunch and tea and supper and breakfast, thank God! and for many a long day!

CURTAIN.

ACT II.

The curtain rises on MARGARET'S *drawing-room. It is prettily furnished in a gentle, white-walled, water-colour-in-gold-frame fashion, and is full of flowers. In one corner is a parrot in a cage, and near it* MISS FAIRFIELD'S *arm-chair and foot-stool and work-table. The fire-place has a white sheepskin in front of it, and brass fire-irons: on the mantel-piece is a gilt clock and many photographs. At right angles to the fire a low empire couch runs out into the room. There is a hint of* SYDNEY *in the ultra-modern cushionry with which it is piled. As the curtain goes up* BASSETT *is showing in* GRAY MEREDITH.

BASSETT. They're still at lunch, Sir.

GRAY. [*Glancing at the clock*] They're late.

BASSETT. It's the visitor, Sir. He's kept them talking.

GRAY. Visitor?

BASSETT. Yes, Sir, a strange gentleman. Will you take coffee, Sir?

GRAY. I may as well go in and have it with them.

BASSETT. The mistress said, would you not, Sir. She'd come to you.

GRAY. [*A little surprised*] Oh, very well.

BASSETT. I'll tell Miss Sydney you've come, Sir.

GRAY. [*Lifting his eyebrows*] Tell Mrs. Fairfield.

BASSETT. Miss Sydney said I was to tell her too, Sir, quietly.

GRAY. [*Puzzled*] Is—? [*He checks an impulse to question the servant*] All right!

BASSETT. Thank you, Sir.

She goes out, leaving the door open. There is a slight pause. MARGARET *comes in hurriedly, shutting the door behind her.*

GRAY. [*Smiling*] Well, what's the mystery?

MARGARET. Gray, he's come back!

GRAY. Who?

MARGARET. Hilary!

GRAY. [*Lightly*] Hilary? What Hilary? *Hilary!*

MARGARET. Yes.

GRAY. Good God!

MARGARET. He got away. He came straight here. I found him with Sydney.

GRAY. Don't be frightened. I'm here. Is he dangerous?

MARGARET. No, no, poor fellow!

GRAY. You can't be sure. Anyway, I'd better take charge of him while you phone the asylum. No, that won't do, there are no trains. We must ring up the authorities.

MARGARET. Oh, no, Gray!

GRAY. It's not pleasant, but it's the only thing to do.

MARGARET. You don't understand.

GRAY. There's only one way to deal with an escaped lunatic.

MARGARET. But he's not. He's well.

GRAY. What's that?

MARGARET. He's well. He knows me. He—

GRAY. I don't believe it.

MARGARET. Do you think I want to believe it? Oh, what a ghastly thing to say!

GRAY. This has nothing to do with you. He has nothing to do with you. Leave me to deal with him. [*He goes towards the door.*]

MARGARET. Where are you going?

GRAY. 'Phoning for Dr. Alliot to begin with.

MARGARET. Sydney's done that already.

GRAY. Sydney's head's on her shoulders.

MARGARET. He'll be here as soon as he can. He could always manage Hilary.

GRAY. You'd better go up to your room.

MARGARET. No.

GRAY. Don't take it too hard. It'll be over in an hour. We'll get him away quietly, poor devil.

MARGARET. But it's no good, Gray, he's well. We've been on to the asylum already. They say we should have heard in a day or two even if he hadn't got away.

GRAY. Really well?

MARGARET. The old Hilary—voice and ways and —oh, my God! what am I to do?

GRAY. Do? You?

MARGARET. Don't you see, he knows nothing? His hair's grey and he talks as he talked at twenty. It's horrible.

GRAY. What do you mean, he knows nothing?

MARGARET. About the divorce. About you and me. He thinks it's all—as he left it.

GRAY. [*Incredulously*] You've said nothing?

MARGARET. He's like a lost child come home. Do you think I want to send him crazy again? He—

GRAY. [*With a certain anger*] You've said nothing?

MARGARET. Not yet.

GRAY. You'll come away with me at once.

MARGARET. I can't. I've got to think of Hilary.

GRAY. You've got to think of me.

MARGARET. I *am* you. But I've done him so much injury—

GRAY. *You've* done Fairfield injury? You little saint!

MARGARET. Saint? I'm a wicked woman. I'm wishing he hadn't got well. I'm wishing the doctors will say it's not true. In my wicked heart I'm calling down desolation on my own husband.

GRAY. You have no husband. You're marrying me in a week. You're mine.

MARGARET. I'm afraid—

GRAY. Whose are you? Answer me.

MARGARET. Yours.

GRAY. You know it?

MARGARET. I know it.

GRAY. Then never be afraid again.

MARGARET. No, not when you're here. I'm not afraid when you're here. But I must be good to Hilary. You see that?

GRAY. What good is "good" to him, poor devil?

MARGARET. At least I'll break it gently.

GRAY. Gently? That's just like a woman. All you can do for him is to come away now.

MARGARET. How can I? He's got to be told.

GRAY. Then let me tell him.

MARGARET. No, no! From you, just from you, it would be wanton. I won't have cruelty.

GRAY. We'll go straight up to town and get married at once. That'll settle everything.

MARGARET. You mustn't rush me. I've got to do what's right.

GRAY. It is right. There's nothing else to be done. You can't stay here.

MARGARET. No, I can't stay here. Don't let me stay here.

GRAY. Come with me. The car's outside. You say Alliot will be here in ten minutes. Leave him a note. He's an old friend as well as a doctor. Let him deal with it if you won't let me.

MARGARET. Oh, can't you see that I must tell Hilary myself?

GRAY. [*Angrily*] Women are incomprehensible!

MARGARET. It's men who are uncomprehending. Can't you feel that it'll hurt him less from me?

GRAY. It'll hurt him ten thousand times more.

MARGARET. But differently. It's the things one might have said that fester. At least I'll spare him that torment. He shall say all he wants to say.

GRAY [*Blackly*] I suppose the truth is that there's something in the very best of women that enjoys a scene.

MARGARET. That's the first bitter thing you've ever said to me.

GRAY. [*Breaking out*] Can't you see what it does to me to know you are in the same house with him? For God's sake come out of it!

MARGARET. [*Close to him*] I want to come, now, this moment. I want to be forced to come.

GRAY. That settles it.

MARGARET. [*Eluding him*] But I mustn't! Don't you see that I mustn't? I can't leave Sydney to lay my past for me.

GRAY. Your past is dead.

MARGARET. Its ghost's awake and walking.

HILARY'S VOICE. Meg! Meg!

MARGARET. [*Clinging to him*] Listen, it's calling to me.

HILARY'S VOICE. Meg, where are you?

MARGARET. It's too late! I'm too old! I shall never get away from him. I told you it was too good to be true.

GRAY. [*Deliberately matter-of-fact*] Listen to me! I am going home now. There are orders to be given. I must get some money and papers. But

I shall be back here in an hour. I give you just that hour to tell him what you choose. After that you'll be ready to come.

MARGARET. If—if I've managed—

GRAY. There's no if. You're coming.

MARGARET. Am I coming, Gray?

HILARY. [*Entering from the hall*] Meg, Sydney said you'd gone to your room. Hullo! What's this? Who's this? Doctor, eh? I've been expecting them down on me. [*To* GRAY] It's no good, you know. I'm as fit as you are. Any test you like.

MARGARET. Mr. Meredith called to see me, Hilary! He's just going.

HILARY. Oh, sorry! [*He walks to the fire and stands warming his hands, but watching them over his shoulder.*]

GRAY. [*At the door, in a low voice to* MARGARET] I don't like leaving you.

MARGARET. You must! It's better! But—come back quickly!

GRAY. You'll be ready?

MARGARET. I will. [GRAY *goes out.*]

HILARY. [*Uneasily*] Who's that man?

MARGARET. His name's Gray Meredith.

HILARY. What's he doing here?

MARGARET. He's an old friend.

HILARY. I don't know him, do I?

MARGARET. It's since you were ill. It's the last five years.

HILARY. He's in love with you! I tell you, the man's in love with you! Do you think I'm so dazed and crazed I can't see that? You shouldn't let him, Meg! You're such a child you don't know what you're doing when you look and smile—

MARGARET. [*In a strained voice*] I do know. [*She stands quite still in the middle of the room, her head lifted, a beautiful woman.*]

HILARY. [*Staring at her*] Lord, I don't wonder at him, poor brute! [*Still staring*] Meg, you've changed.

MARGARET. [*Catching at the opening*] Yes, Hilary.

HILARY. Taller, more beautiful—and yet I miss something.

MARGARET. [*Urging him on*] Yes, Hilary.

HILARY. [*Wistfully*] —something you used to have—kind—a kind way with you. The child's got it. Sydney—my daughter, Sydney! She's more you than you are. You—you've grown right up—away—beyond me—haven't you?

MARGARET. Yes, Hilary.

HILARY. But I'm going to catch up. You'll help me to catch up with you—Meg? [*She doesn't answer.*] Meg! wait for me! Meg, where are you? Why don't you hold out your hands?

MARGARET. [*Wrung for him*] I can't, Hilary! My hands are full.

HILARY. [*His tone lightening into relief*] What,

Sydney? She'll be off in no time. She's told me about the boy—what's his name—Kit—already.

MARGARET. It's not Sydney.

HILARY. What? [*Crescendo*] Eh? What are you driving at? What are you trying to tell me? What's changed you? Why do you look at me sideways? Why do you flinch when I speak loudly? Yes—and when I kissed you— It's that man! [*He goes up to her and takes her by the wrist, staring into her face.*] Is it true? *You?*

MARGARET. [*Pitifully*] I've done nothing wrong. I'm trying to tell you. I only want to tell you and make you understand. Hilary, fifteen years is a long time—

HILARY. [*Dully*] Yes. I suppose it's a long time for a woman to be faithful.

MARGARET. That's it! That's the whole thing! If I'd loved you it wouldn't have been long—

HILARY. [*Violently, crying her down*] You did love me once.

MARGARET. [*Beaten*] Did I—once? I don't know—

There is a silence.

HILARY. [*Without expression*] What do you expect me to do? Forgive you?

MARGARET. [*Stung*] There's nothing to forgive. [*Softening*] Oh, so much, Hilary, to forgive each other; but not that.

HILARY. [*More and more roughly as he loses*

control of himself] Divorce you then? Because I'll not do that! I'll have no dirty linen washed in the courts.

MARGARET [*Forced into the open*] Hilary, I divorced you twelve months ago.

HILARY. [*Shouting*] What? What? What?

MARGARET. I divorced you—

HILARY. [*Beside himself*] You're mad! You couldn't do it! You'd no cause! D'you think I'm to be put off with your lies? Am I a child? You'd no cause! Oh, I see what you're at. You want to confuse me. You want to pull wool over my eyes. You want to drive me off my head—drive me mad again. You devil! You devil! You shan't do it. I've got friends— Sydney! where's that girl [*Shouting*] Sydney! Hester! All of you! Come here! Come here, I say! [SYDNEY *opens the drawing room door.*]

SYDNEY. Mother, what is it? [*She enters, followed by* MISS FAIRFIELD. *To* HILARY—] What are you doing? You're frightening her.

HILARY. [*Wildly*] No, no! You're not on her side. You're little Sydney—kind—my Sydney! What did you say—go slow, eh! Keep your hand here—cool, cool. [*Then as* SYDNEY, *breaking from him, makes a movement to her mother*] Stand away from that woman!

MARGARET. Sydney, humour him.

HILARY. [*At white heat*] What was I calling you for, eh? Oh, yes, a riddle. I've got a riddle for

you. There was a man at that place—used to ask riddles—the moon told 'em to him. Just such a white face whispering out of the blue—lies! He couldn't find the answers—sent him off his head. But I know the answer. When's a wife not a wife, eh? Want to know the answer? [*Pointing to* MARGARET] When she's *this—this—this!* [*Confidentially*] She's poisoning me.

MISS FAIRFIELD. Now, Hilary! Hilary!—

HILARY. Sydney, come here! I'll tell *you.* [SYDNEY *stands torn between the two.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD. What have you done to him, Margaret?

MARGARET. I've told him the truth.

MISS FAIRFIELD. God forgive you!

HILARY. [*Raving*] I tell you she's pouring poison into my ear. You remember that fellow in the play—and *his* wife? That's what she's done. If I told you what she said to me, you'd think I was mad. And that's what she wants you to think. She wants to get rid of me. She's got a tame cat about the place. I'm in the way. And so she comes to me, d'you see, and tells me—what do you think? She says she's not my wife. What do you think of that?

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Grimly*] You may well ask.

MARGARET. [*To* SYDNEY] He won't listen—

SYDNEY. Sit down, darling! You're shaking.

MARGARET. He's always had these rages. It's

my fault. I began at the wrong end. Hilary—it's not—I'm not what you think.

HILARY. Then what was that man doing in my house?

MARGARET. In a week I'm going to marry him.

HILARY. D'you hear her? To *me* she says this! Is she mad or am I?

MARGARET. [*Desperately*] I tell you there's been a law passed—

MISS FAIRFIELD. No need for him to know that now, Margaret!

SYDNEY. Of course he has to know.

MISS FAIRFIELD. Not now.

MARGARET. [*On the defensive*] I don't know what you mean, Aunt Hester!

MISS FAIRFIELD. Let us rather thank God that he has come back in time.

MARGARET. [*Uneasy*] In time? In time?

MISS FAIRFIELD. To snatch a brand from the burning.

MARGARET. I'm a free woman. I've got my divorce.

MISS FAIRFIELD. Whom God hath joined let no man put asunder.

MARGARET [*At bay*] I'm a free woman. I'm going to marry Gray Meredith. This is a trap! Sydney!

MISS FAIRFIELD. Is this talk for a young girl to hear?

MARGARET. Sydney, you're to fetch Gray.

HILARY [*With weak violence*] If he comes here I'll kill him.

MARGARET. [*Catching* SYDNEY *back*] No, no! D'you hear him? What am I to do?

SYDNEY. It's all right, Mother! We'll manage somehow.

BASSETT. [*Entering*] Dr. Alliot is in the hall, ma'am.

MARGARET. [*With a gasp of relief*] Ask him to come in here. At once.

Dr. Alliot trots in. He is a pleasant, round-about, clean little old man, with a twinkling face and brisk chubby movements of the hands. He is upright and his voice is strong. He wears his seventy odd years like a good joke that he expects you to keep up, in spite of the fact that he is really your own age and understands you better than you do yourself. But behind his comfortable manner is a hint of authority which has its effect, especially on HILARY.

DR. ALLIOT. What's all this I hear? Well, well! Good afternoon, Mrs. Fairfield! Good afternoon, Miss Fairfield! Merry Christmas, Sydney! Now then, now for him! Welcome back, Fairfield! Welcome back, my boy!

HILARY. It's—it's old Alliot, isn't it?

DR. ALLIOT. Your memory's all right I see.

HILARY. I suppose they've sent for you—

DR. ALLIOT. Well, well, you see, you've arrived rather unconventionally. I've been in touch with—

HILARY. That place?

DR. ALLIOT. Why, yes! You may have to go back, you know. Formalities! Formalities!

HILARY. I don't mind. I'm well. I'm well. Alliot! I'm not afraid of what you'll say. I'm not afraid of any of you.

DR. ALLIOT. Well, well, well! that sounds hopeful.

HILARY. But I can't go yet, Doctor.

DR. ALLIOT. Only for a day or two.

HILARY. It's my wife. I lost my temper. I do lose my temper. It means nothing. Go slow, eh? My wife's ill, Doctor. She's not right in her head,

DR. ALLIOT. [*Alert*] Ah!

HILARY. [*With a wave of his hand*] So are the rest of them. Mad as hatters.

DR. ALLIOT. Hm!

HILARY. [*Checked, glances at him keenly a moment. Then chuckling*] Oh, you're thinking that's a delusion.

DR. ALLIOT. [*Humouring him*] Between you and me, it's a common one.

HILARY. [*Half flattered*] Ah, we know, don't we? Served in the same shop, eh? Only the counter between us.

DR. ALLIOT. [*Feeling his way*] Well, well—

HILARY. But look here! She says she's not my wife.

DR. ALLIOT. [*Enlightened*] Oh! Oh, that's the trouble!

HILARY. She says she's not my wife.

DR. ALLIOT. [*Soberly*] It's a hard case, Fairfield.

HILARY. What d'you mean by that?

DR. ALLIOT. It's the old wisdom of the scape-goat—it is expedient—how does it go? expedient—?

SYDNEY. "It is expedient that one man should die for the people."

DR. ALLIOT. That's it! A hard word, but a true one.

HILARY. What has that got to do with me?

DR. ALLIOT. Well, the situation is this—

HILARY. There is no situation. I married Meg. I fell ill. Now I'm well again. I want my wife.

DR. ALLIOT, Why, yes—yes—

HILARY. [*Picking it up irritably*] "Yes—yes—" "Yes—yes—" I suppose that's what you call humouring a lunatic.

DR. ALLIOT. Why, I hope to be convinced, Fairfield, that that trouble's over, but—

HILARY. But you're going to lock me up again because I want my wife.

DR. ALLIOT. [*Patiently*] Will you let me put the case to you?

HILARY. You can put fifty cases. It makes no difference.

SYDNEY. [*At his elbow, softly*] Father, I'd listen.

HILARY. [*Slipping his arm through hers*] Eh? Sydney? that you? You're not against me, Sydney?

SYDNEY. Nobody's against you. We only want you to listen.

HILARY. Well, out with it!

DR. ALLIOT. D'you remember—can you throw your mind back to the beginning of the agitation against the marriage laws? No, you were a schoolboy—

HILARY. Deceased wife's sister, eh? That's the law that lets a man marry his sister-in-law and won't let a woman marry her brother-in-law. Pretty good, that, for your side of the counter.

DR. ALLIOT. Well, well, that hardly matters now.

HILARY. It shows what your rotten, muddleheaded laws are worth, anyhow.

SYDNEY. Father.

HILARY. All right! Go ahead! Go ahead!

DR. ALLIOT. Well, as the result of that agitation —and remember, Hilary, what thousand, thousand tragedies must have had voice in such an outcry— a commission was appointed to enquire into the working of the divorce laws. It made its report, recommended certain drastic reforms, and there, I suppose, as is the way with commissions, would have been the end of the subject, if it hadn't been for the war—and the war marriages.

HILARY [*Lowering*] So that's where I come in! Margaret, is that where I come in?

DR. ALLIOT. Never, I suppose, in one decade were there so many young marriages. Happy? that's another thing! Marry in haste—

MARGARET. They weren't all happy.

DR. ALLIOT. But they were *young*, those boys and girls who married. As young as Kit, and as impatient as Sydney. And that saved them. That young, young generation found out, out of their own unhappiness, the war taught them, what peace couldn't teach us—that when conditions are evil it is not your duty to submit—that when conditions are evil, your duty, in spite of protests, in spite of sentiment, your duty, though you trample on the bodies of your nearest and dearest to do it, though you bleed your own heart white, your duty is to see that those conditions are changed. If your laws forbid you, you must change your laws. If your church forbids you, you must change your church; and if your God forbids you, why then, you must change your God.

MISS FAIRFIELD. And we who will not change?

MARGARET. Or cannot change— ?

DR. ALLIOT. Stifle. Like a snake that can't cast its skin. Grow or perish—it's the law of life. And so, when this young generation—yours, not mine, Hilary—decided that the marriage laws were, I won't say evil, but outgrown, they set to work to change them.

MISS FAIRFIELD. You needn't think it was without protest, Hilary. I joined the anti-divorce league myself.

DR. ALLIOT. No, it wasn't without protest. Mrs. Grundy and the churches are protesting still. But

in spite of protest, no man or woman to-day is bound to a drunkard, an habitual criminal, or—

HILARY. Or—?

DR. ALLIOT. Or to a partner who, as far as we doctors know—

HILARY. But you can't be sure!

DR. ALLIOT. I say as far as we know, is incurably insane—in practice, is insane for more than five years.

HILARY. And if he recovers? Look at me!

DR. ALLIOT. [*With a sigh*]—"It is expedient—"

HILARY. And you call that justice!

MARGARET. At least call it mercy. All the days of your life to stand at the window, Hilary, and watch the sun shining on the other side of the road—it's hard, it's hard on a woman.

DR. ALLIOT. At least call it common sense. If a man can't live his normal life, it's as if he were dead. If he's an incurable drunkard, if he's shut away for life in prison—

HILARY. But I'm not a drunkard. I'm not a convict. I've done nothing. I've been to the war, to fight, for her, for all of you, for my country, for this law-making machine that I've called my country. And when I've got from it, not honourable scars, not medals and glory, but sixteen years in hell, then when I get out again, then the country I've fought for, the laws I've fought for, the woman I've fought for, they say to me, "As you've done without her for fifteen years you can do without

her altogether." That's what it is. When I was helpless they conspired behind my back to take away all I had from me. [*To* MARGARET] Did I ever hurt you? Didn't I love you? Didn't you love me? Could I help being ill? What have I done?

SYDNEY. You died, Father.

MARGARET. Sydney, don't be cruel.

MISS FAIRFIELD. Ah, we cry after the dead, but I've always wondered what their welcome back would be.

HILARY. Well, you know now.

DR. ALLIOT. I don't say it isn't hard—

HILARY. Ah, you don't say it isn't hard. That's good of you. That's sympathy indeed. And my wife—she's full of it too, isn't she? "Poor dear! I was married to him once. I'd quite forgotten."

MARGARET. For pity's sake, Hilary!

DR. ALLIOT. Why, face it, man! One of you must suffer. Which is it to be? The useful or the useless? the whole or the maimed? the healthy woman with her life before her, or the man whose children ought never to have been born?

HILARY. [*In terrible appeal*] Margaret!

SYDNEY. Is that true, Dr. Alliot? Is that true?

MARGARET. [*Her voice shaking*] I think you go too far.

DR. ALLIOT. Mrs. Fairfield, in this matter I cannot go too far.

MISS FAIRFIELD. For me, at any rate—too far

and too fast altogether! Before ladies! It's not nice. It's enough to call down a judgment.

BASSETT. [*Entering*] Mr. Pumphrey to see you, ma'am. [*To* SYDNEY] And Mr. Kit.

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Justified*] Ah!

MARGARET. I can't see anyone.

BASSETT. He said, ma'am, it was important.

HILARY. Who? Who?

MISS FAIRFIELD. The Rector. I expect he's heard about you.

HILARY. I can't see him. I won't see him. Let me go. I've met the Levites. Spare me the priest. [*He breaks away from them and goes stumbling out at the other door.*]

SYDNEY. [*Following him anxiously*] Father!

DR. ALLIOT. [*Preventing her*] No, no, my child! I'll look after him. [*He goes out quickly.*]

The RECTOR *is an insignificant man, with an important manner and a plum in his mouth. He enters with* KIT, *who is flushed and perturbed.*

RECTOR. Ah, good afternoon, Mrs. Fairfield—Miss Fairfield—

MARGARET. [*Mechanically. She is very tired and inattentive*] A happy Christmas, Mr. Pumphrey!

RECTOR. Ah! Just so! Christmas afternoon An unusual day to call, Mrs. Fairfield, and, I fear, an inconvenient hour—

MARGARET. Not at all, Mr. Pumphrey.

RECTOR. I can give myself [*he takes out his watch*] till three fifteen, no longer. The children's service is at three thirty.

MARGARET. [*Turning to the bell*] Mayn't I order you an early cup of tea?

RECTOR. Thank you, thank you, no. Busy as I am, I should not have disturbed you—

MISS FAIRFIELD. Rector, it's as if you had been sent!

RECTOR. Ah! gratifying! I did not see you at the morning service, Miss Fairfield. But last night—*late* last night—

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*With a look at* SYDNEY] Three A.M., Rector?

RECTOR. Three fifteen, Miss Fairfield.

KIT. Look here, Father—

RECTOR. I received certain information from my son—

KIT. No, you don't, Father. I'll have my say first. It's just this, Mrs. Fairfield—

RECTOR. [*Fussed*] Christopher? Christopher?

KIT. [*He is very much in earnest and he addresses himself solely to* MARGARET] I want you to know that it is nothing to do with me, Mrs. Fairfield. I don't agree with my father. [*Confidentially*] You wouldn't think it but I never do.

RECTOR. Christopher?

KIT. [*Ignoring him*] And it was only coming up

the drive that he sprung on me why he wanted to see you, or I wouldn't have come—

MARGARET. [*Liking him*] I think Sydney would have been sorry, Kit.

KIT. [*With a touch of his father's manner*] Yes, well, Sydney and I have talked it over—and I know I'm going into the church myself—but I think he's all wrong, Mrs. Fairfield. [*Unconscious of plagiarism*] I'm not nineteenth century. [*But* SYDNEY *giggles.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD. Rector, what's the matter with the young man?

KIT. [*Forging ahead*] You see, I'm pretty keen about Sydney, and so, naturally, I'm pretty keen about you, Mrs. Fairfield?

RECTOR. Miss Fairfield, I'm without words.

KIT. [*Burdened*] —and I just wanted to tell you that I can't tell you what I think of my father over this business. It makes me wild.

SYDNEY. Kit, you'd better shut up.

KIT. [*Turning to* SYDNEY] Well, I only wanted her to understand that I'm not responsible for my father—that he's not my own choice, if you know what I mean. [*They talk aside.*]

RECTOR. His mother's right hand! I don't know what's come over him.

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Grimly*] A pretty face, Rector!

RECTOR. Ah! the very point! I shall be glad to see you alone, Mrs. Fairfield—not you, of course,

Miss Fairfield, but—er— [*He glances at* KIT *and* SYDNEY.]

MARGARET. [*Resignedly*] Sydney, have you shown Kit all your presents?

SYDNEY. [*Reluctantly taking the hint, but continuing the conversation as they go out*] What did you let him come for? Oh, you're no good! [*The door bangs behind them.*]

MARGARET. [*Half smiling*] Well, Mr. Pumphrey. I suppose it's about Sydney and Kit?

RECTOR. Mrs. Fairfield, until last night we encouraged, we were gratified—

MARGARET. Last night? Oh, the dance!

RECTOR. I sat up for my son until three fifteen of Christmas morning. His excuse was your daughter—

MARGARET. [*With dignity*] Do you take objection to Sydney, Mr. Pumphrey?

RECTOR. Now, my dear lady, you mustn't misunderstand me—

MARGARET. [*Quietly*] To me, then?

RECTOR. Mrs. Fairfield, I beg— But in the course of a slight—er—altercation between Christopher and myself it transpired—

MARGARET. [*She has been prepared for it*] I see, It's her father—

RECTOR. I am grieved—grieved for you.

MARGARET. But his illness was no secret.

RECTOR. My heart, Mrs. Fairfield, and Mrs. Pumphrey's heart has gone out to you in your affliction. When the light of reason—

MARGARET. Then you did know. *Then* I don't follow.

RECTOR. But according to Christopher—

MARGARET. Well?

RECTOR. Mrs. Fairfield, is your husband alive or dead?

MARGARET. My former husband is alive.

RECTOR. [*With a half deprecatory, half triumphant gesture*] Out of your own mouth, Mrs. Fairfield—

MARGARET. [*Bewildered*] But you say you knew he was insane?

RECTOR. But I didn't know he was alive.

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Irritated*] Don't be so foolish, Margaret. It's not the insanity, it's the divorce.

RECTOR. When I realised that I had been within a week of re-marrying a divorced person—

MARGARET. [*Coldly*] Why didn't you go to Mr. Meredith?

RECTOR. Mr. Meredith is—er—a difficult man to—er—approach. I felt that an appeal to your feelings, as a Christian, as a mother—

MARGARET. You mean you'll prevent Kit marrying Sydney—?

RECTOR. It depends on you, Mrs. Fairfield. I won't let him marry the child of a woman who remarries while her husband is alive.

MARGARET. But the church allows it?

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Correcting her*] Winks at it, Margaret.

RECTOR. [*With dignity*] "Winks" is hardly the word—

MARGARET. Then what word would you use, Mr. Pumphrey?

RECTOR. I am not concerned with words.

MARGARET. But I want to know. I care about my church. It lets me and it doesn't let me—what does it mean?

RECTOR. [*Much moved*] I am not concerned with meanings, Mrs. Fairfield. I am concerned with my own conscience.

MISS FAIRFIELD. Margaret—you've no business to upset the Rector. Why don't you tell him that the situation has changed?

MARGARET. Nothing has changed.

RECTOR. Changed?

MISS FAIRFIELD. My nephew has recovered—returned. He's in the house now.

RECTOR. Providence! It's providence! [*With enthusiasm*] I never knew anything like providence. Changed indeed, Miss Fairfield! My objection goes. Dear little Sydney! Ah, Mrs. Fairfield, in a year you and your husband will look back on this—episode as on a dream—a bad dream—

MARGARET. [*Stonily*] I have no husband.

RECTOR. Ah! the re-marriage—a mere formality—

MISS FAIRFIELD. Simpler still—the decree can be rescinded.

MARGARET. [*Stunned*] Aunt Hester, knowing his history, knowing mine, is it possible that you expect me to go back to him?

MISS FAIRFIELD. He's come back to you.

RECTOR. A wife's duty—

MARGARET. [*Slowly*] I think you're wicked. I think you're both wicked.

RECTOR. Mrs. Fairfield!

MISS FAIRFIELD. Control yourself, Margaret!

MARGARET. [*With a touch of wildness in her manner*] You—do you love your wife?

RECTOR. Mrs. Fairfield!

MARGARET. Do you?

RECTOR. Mrs. Pumphrey and I—most attached—

MARGARET. Suppose you weren't. Think of it—to want so desperately to feel—and to feel nothing. Do you know what it means to dread a person who loves you? To stiffen at the look in their eyes? To pity and—shudder? You should not judge.

HILARY, *unseen, opens the door and shuts it again quickly.*

RECTOR. I—I—

MISS FAIRFIELD. There it is, you see, Rector! She doesn't care *what* she says.

DR. ALLIOT *enters.*

DR. ALLIOT. [*Gravely, holding the door behind him*] Margaret, my child— [*He sees the others and his voice changes*] Hullo, Pumphrey! You here still? Well, well—you're cutting it fine.

RECTOR. The service! [*He pulls out his watch, stricken.*]

DR. ALLIOT. I'll run you down there if you'll wait a minute. [*To* MARGARET, *privately, poking a wise forefinger*] What you want, my child, is a good cry and a cup of tea.

RECTOR. [*Coming up to* MARGARET, *stiffly*] Good-day, Mrs. Fairfield! You will not—reconsider—?

MARGARET. I will not.

RECTOR. I regret—I regret— [*To* MISS FAIRFIELD] My dear lady, you have my sympathy. I think I left my hat— [MISS FAIRFIELD *escorts him into the hall.*]

DR. ALLIOT. Hilary's coming home with me, Margaret. He wants a word with you first. Can you manage that?

MARGARET. Of course.

DR. ALLIOT. [*Abruptly*] Where's Meredith?

MARGARET. [*Eagerly*] He's coming. He's taking me away.

DR. ALLIOT. Good. The sooner the better.

RECTOR. [*Reappearing at the door*] Dr. Alliot—it now wants seven minutes to the half.

DR. ALLIOT. Coming! Coming! See now—you can be gentle with him—

MARGARET. Of course.

DR. ALLIOT. [*With a keen look at her*] Nor yet too gentle. Well, well, God be with you, child! [*He trots out.*]

HILARY *comes in, hesitating. If he is without dignity, he is, nevertheless, too much like a hectored, forlorn child to be ludicrous.*

HILARY. Have they gone? [*Reassuring her*] It's all right. I'm going too. [*He waits for her to answer. She says nothing*] I'm going. I've got to I see that. He's made me see.

MARGARET. Dr. Alliot?

HILARY. I'm going to stay with him till I can look round. He's going to make it right with that place.

MARGARET. I'm glad you've got a good friend, Hilary.

HILARY. Yes, he's a good chap. He's talked to me. He's made me see. [*He comes a little closer.*] He says—and I do see— It's too late, of course— [*his look at her is a petition, but she makes no sign*] isn't it? [*He comes nearer.*] Yes—it's too late. It wouldn't be fair—to ask you—[*again the look*] would it?

MARGARET. [*Imploringly*] Oh, Hilary, Hilary!

HILARY. [*Encouraged to come closer*] No woman could be expected—you couldn't be expected—[*she makes no sign*] could you? [*Repeating his lesson*] It's what he says—you've made a new life for yourself—[*he waits*] haven't you? There's no room in it—for me—is there? [*He is close to her. She does not move.*] So it's just a case of—saying good-bye and going, because—because—I quite see —there's no chance— [*Suddenly he throws himself*

down beside her, catching at her hands, clinging to her knees] Oh! Meg, Meg, Meg! isn't there just a chance?

MARGARET. [*Faintly*] Hilary, I can't stand it.

HILARY. [*And from now to the end of the scene he is at full pelt, tumbling over his words, frantic*] Yes, but listen to me! Listen to me! You don't listen. Listen to me! I've been alone so long—

MARGARET. Gray! Gray! Why don't you come?

HILARY. I'll not trouble you. I'll not get in your way—but—don't leave me all alone. Give me something—the rustle of your dress, the cushion where you've lain—your voice about the house. You can't deny me such little things, that you give your servant and your dog.

MARGARET. It's madness—

HILARY. It's naked need!

MARGARET. What good should I be to you? I don't love you, Hilary—poor Hilary. I love him. I never think of anything but him.

HILARY. But it's me you married. You promised —you promised—better or worse—in sickness in health— You can't go back on your promise.

MARGARET. It isn't fair.

HILARY. Anything's fair! You don't know what misery means.

MARGARET. I'm learning.

HILARY. But you don't *know*. You couldn't leave me to it if you knew. Why, I've never known you hurt a creature in all your life! Remember

the rat-hunts in the barn, the way we used to chaff you? and the starling? and the kitten you found? Why, I've seen you step aside for a little creeping green thing on the path. You've never hurt anything. Then how can you hurt me so? You can't have changed since yesterday—

MARGARET. [*In despairing protest*] It's half my life ago—

HILARY. It's yesterday, it's yesterday!

MARGARET. [*With the fleeting courage of a half caught bird*] Yes, it *is* yesterday. It's how you took me—yesterday—and now you're doing it again!

HILARY. [*Catching at the hope of it*] Am I? Am I? Is it yesterday? yesterday come back again?

MARGARET. [*In the toils*] No—no! Hilary, I can't!

HILARY. [*At white heat*] No, you can't. You can't leave me. You can't do it to me. You can't drive me out—the wilderness—alone—alone—alone. You can't do it, Meg—you can't do it—you can't!

MARGARET. [*Beaten*] I suppose—I can't.

HILARY. You—you'll stay with me? [*Breaking down utterly*] Oh, God bless you, Meg, God bless you, God bless you—

She resigns her hands to him while she sits, flattened against the back of her chair, quivering a little, like a crucified moth.

MARGARET. [*Puzzling it out*] You mean—God help me?

CURTAIN.

ACT III.

The scene is the same as in ACT I. MISS FAIRFIELD *sits reading.* SYDNEY *is fidgeting about the room.* BASSETT *comes in and begins to lay the cloth.* KIT, *who enters unseen behind her, sees* MISS FAIRFIELD *and makes hastily up the stair on tip-toe.*

SYDNEY. [*Turning*] Oh, Bassett, isn't it rather early for tea? Lunch was so late.

BASSETT. [*Desisting*] Oh, very well, miss.

MISS FAIRFIELD. Now, Sydney! Always trying to upset things! I'm more than ready for my tea. Bring it in at once, Bassett.

BASSETT, Very well, ma'am!

SYDNEY. Auntie, I know Mother won't want to be disturbed.

MISS FAIRFIELD. It's high time she was. Talk! Talk! No consideration. She'll tire Hilary out. [*She goes towards the drawing-room.*]

SYDNEY. [*Worried*] Auntie, I think—

MISS FAIRFIELD. Then you shouldn't! [*She goes out.*]

BASSETT. Shall I bring in tea, Miss Sydney?

SYDNEY. [*With a twinkle*] I think we'll wait half an hour.

BASSETT. [*With an answering twinkle*] Very well, miss.

SYDNEY. Oh—Bassett—tell Mr. Kit that—er—that the coast's clear.

BASSETT. He didn't stay out with us, miss. Him and the puppy together was a bit too much for cook, with the turkey on her hands. [*Looking round*] He's here somewhere, miss. [*She goes out.*]

SYDNEY. [*Addressing space*] Kit, you idiot, come out!

KIT. [*Appearing at the head of the stairs*] I spend half my life dodging your aunt. [*As he runs downstairs he rakes a bunch of mistletoe from the top of a picture.*] She spoilt the whole effect this morning, but now— [*He advances on* SYDNEY.]

SYDNEY. [*Enjoying herself*] What do you want now?

KIT. [*Chanting*] "The mistletoe hung in the old oak hall!"—

SYDNEY. [*Eluding him*] Shut up, Kit! [*They dodge and scuffle like two puppies till the drawing-room door opens, letting in the sound of voices.*]

KIT. Sst! [*He dashes up the stairs and comes down again much more soberly as* SYDNEY *says over her shoulder*—]

SYDNEY. It's only Mother.

MARGARET *comes dragging into the room, shutting the door behind her.*

SYDNEY. [*The laughter dying out of her*] Oh, Mother, how white you look!

MARGARET. Has Kit gone?

SYDNEY. No, but I can get rid of him if you want me to.

MARGARET. I want him to wait. I want him to take a letter for me to Gray.

SYDNEY. Do you want Gray to come here?

MARGARET. I want him not to come here.

SYDNEY. Oh, I see, not till after Father's gone.

MARGARET. He's not going.

SYDNEY. Mother!

MARGARET *looks at her with twitching lips.*

SYDNEY. Mother, you haven't—

MARGARET. I can't talk to you now, Sydney.

SYDNEY. But Mother—

MARGARET. Please.

SYDNEY. But Mother—

MARGARET. Ask Kit to wait a few minutes.

SYDNEY. But—

MARGARET *goes into the inner room and sits down to write at a little desk near the window. Her back is turned to them and she is soon absorbed in her letter.* SYDNEY *stands deep in thought.*

KIT. [*At the foot of the stairs*] All serene?

SYDNEY *makes no answer.* KIT *prances up behind her with the bunch of mistletoe.*

KIT. [*Repeating his success*] "The mistletoe hung in the old oak hall!"

SYDNEY. [*Violently*] Oh, for God's sake, stop it!

KIT. [*Quenched*] What's the row?

SYDNEY. You never know when to stop.

KIT. Well, you needn't snap out at a person—

SYDNEY. [*Impulsively*] Sorry! Oh, sorry, old man! I'm jumpy to-day.

KIT. [*Chaffing her*] Nervy old thing!

SYDNEY. [*Stricken*] I—I suppose I am.

KIT. One minute you're as nice as pie, and then you fizz up like a seidlitz powder, all about nothing.

SYDNEY. All about nothing. Sorry, my old Kit, sorry! [*She flings herself down on the sofa. Then, with an effort*] Come and talk. What's the news?

KIT. I told you it all this morning. What's your's?

SYDNEY. I like yours better. How's the pamphlet going?

KIT. Nearly done. I put in all your stuff.

SYDNEY. [*Absently*] Good.

KIT. Though you know, I don't agree with it. What I feel is—you're not listening.

SYDNEY. [*Slowly*] Kit, talking of that paper—I read somewhere—suppose now—is it true it can skip a generation?

KIT. It? What?

SYDNEY. Oh—any illness. Consumption or—well, say insanity. Suppose—*you*, for instance—suppose you were a queer family—a little, you

know. Say your mother or your father was queer —and you weren't. You were perfectly fit, you understand, perfectly fit—

KIT. Well?

SYDNEY. What about the children?

KIT. I wouldn't risk it. Thank the Lord your father's only shell-shock.

SYDNEY. Why?

KIT. You can't pass on shell-shock.

SYDNEY. Then you can pass on insanity—even if you're fit yourself?

KIT. Of course you can.

SYDNEY. It would be very wicked, wouldn't it—to children? Oh, it would be wicked. I suppose when people are in love they don't think.

KIT. Won't think.

SYDNEY. But isn't there a school that says there's no such thing as heredity?

KIT. Well, all I know is I wouldn't risk it.

SYDNEY. It—it's hard on people.

KIT. My word, yes. They say that's why old Alliot never married.

SYDNEY. [*High and mightily*] Oh, village gossip.

KIT. [*Apologetically*] Well, you know what the mater is.

SYDNEY. [*Abandoning her dignity*] Who was it, Kit?

KIT. Old Miss Robson.

SYDNEY. Rot!

KIT. Fact.

SYDNEY. But she's all right.

KIT. Had a game sister.

SYDNEY. Of course! I just remember her. She used to scare me.

KIT. Oh, it must be true. They're such tremendous pals still.

SYDNEY. Poor old things!

KIT. Rotten for her.

SYDNEY. Rottener for him! What did she go on being pals with him for?

KIT. Why shouldn't she?

SYDNEY. Well it stopped him marrying anyone else. She oughtn't to have let him.

KIT. You can't stop a person being fond of you.

SYDNEY. When it's a man you can.

KIT. My dear girl, you don't know what you're talking about.

SYDNEY. My dear boy, if a girl finds out that it's not right for her to marry a man, it's up to her to choke him off.

KIT. Rot!

SYDNEY. Well, I think so.

KIT. Couldn't be done.

SYDNEY. Couldn't it just?

KIT. Any man would see through it.

SYDNEY. As if any man ever saw through anything! As if I couldn't choke you off in five minutes if I wanted to!

KIT. I'd like to see you try!

SYDNEY. Would you?

KIT. My dear girl, we're not all fools where women are concerned.

SYDNEY. I admire your air of conviction.

KIT Don't be clever-clever, old thing. Be— [*His arm slips round her.*]

SYDNEY. [*Edging away*] Don't.

KIT. [*He glances round hastily at* MARGARET, *but she is deep in writing.*] Why not?

SYDNEY. [*Deliberately*] I hate being pawed. [*A pause.*]

KIT. Look here, Sydney, d'you call this a way of spending Christmas afternoon?

SYDNEY. [*Her lip quivering*] It isn't much of a way, is it?

KIT. Well then, old thing! [*Again the arm.*]

SYDNEY. [*Icily*] I told you to leave me alone.

KIT. [*Rising, huffed*] Oh, well, if you can't be decent, I'm going.

SYDNEY. [*Sweetly*] Counter attraction?

KIT. [*Wheeling round on her*] Now, my dear old thing, look here. I know it's only a sort of way you've got into; but when you say—"men!"—with a sort of sneer, and "other attractions"—like that, in that voice, it just sounds cheap. I hate it. It's not like you. I wish you wouldn't.

SYDNEY. Dear me!

KIT. Now I suppose you're annoyed.

SYDNEY. Oh, no, I'm only amused.

KIT. [*Heavily*] There's nothing amusing about me, Sydney. I'm in earnest.

SYDNEY. I'm sure you are. You got out of answering an innocent little question quite neatly. It looks like practice.

KIT. [*Harried*] Now, look here, Sydney, I swear to you—

SYDNEY. [*Like the ghost in Hamlet*] Swear!

KIT. If you're thinking of Alice Hewitt I've only met her four times.

SYDNEY. Oh, so her name's Alice!

KIT. Didn't you know?

SYNDEY. Never heard of her till this minute.

KIT. Then what on earth have you been driving at.

SYDNEY. Trying an experiment.

KIT. If it's because you're jealous—

SYDNEY. Jealous! Jealous of a— What colour are her eyes?

KIT. [*Carelessly*] How'd I know?

SYDNEY. [*With a sudden spurt of suspicion*] Kit! What colour are mine?

KIT. [*Helplessly*] Oh, er—oh—

SYDNEY. [*Terribly*] Kit! What colour are mine? [*Relenting*] Look at my frock, you donkey! What do you suppose I wear blue for? So Alice has got blue eyes!

KIT. How do you know?

SYDNEY. I know you, Kit. You're conservative.

KIT. As a matter of fact, she isn't unlike you. That's what made me talk to her.

SYDNEY. Oh, you've talked to her?

KIT. [*Warming*] Oh, yes—quite a lot. She's a friend of my sister's.

SYDNEY. She always is.

KIT. What d'you mean—"she always is"? I tell you I've only met her four times. I can't make you out.

SYDNEY. No?

KIT. I wish I could make you out.

SYDNEY. [*An ache in her voice*] Oh, I wish you could.

KIT. [*Responding instantly*] I say, old thing, is anything really the matter?

SYDNEY. [*With a glance at* MARGARET] I'm worried.

KIT. Oh, that! Yes, it's beastly for your mother.

SYDNEY. Oh, it's not that. At least—

KIT. What?

SYDNEY. [*Lightly*] Oh, I don't know.

KIT. [*Puzzled*] Can't you tell me?

SYDNEY. No, old man.

KIT. [*As in* ACT. I.] But—look here—marriage has got to be a sort of mutual show, hasn't it? Confidence, and all that?

SYDNEY *goes off into a peal of laughter.*

KIT. What's the matter now?

SYDNEY. Do you preach this sort of sermon to Alice?

KIT. Sydney — that's — that's rude — that's — that's—

SYDNEY. Take time, darling!

KIT. You're being simply insulting.

SYDNEY. Too bad! I should go and tell Alice.

KIT. Damn Alice!

SYDNEY. Oh, no, Kit, she's got blue eyes.

KIT. [*Storming*] Look here, what's up?

SYDNEY. Nix.

KIT. Have you really got your back up? What's the matter with you, Sydney?

SYDNEY. D'you want to know?

KIT. [*With a certain dignity*] I think I'd better.

SYDNEY. Well, it's [*yawning*] "jam to-morrow, jam yesterday, but—" Surely you know how it ends?

KIT. I don't. And I don't want to.

SYDNEY. [*Drearily*] "But never jam to-day."

KIT. [*Startled*] Why, Sydney!

SYDNEY. [*Recovering herself, lightly*] D'you know what that's out of?

KIT. No.

SYDNEY. [*Mischievously*] You ought to—"Alice"—

KIT *makes a furious gesture.*

SYDNEY. [*Appeasing him*] No, no, no! "Alice through the Looking-glass!" [*More soberly*] I can't help it, Kit. When I look in the looking-glass I see—Alice.

KIT. Once and for all, Sydney, will you shut up about Alice?

SYDNEY. Can't. It's her jam to-day.

KIT. I wish you'd talk sense for a change.

SYDNEY. But I am. I'm conveying to you as nicely and tactfully as possible that I'm—

KIT. [*Apprehensive at last*] What, Sydney?

SYDNEY. Tired of jam.

KIT. [*Heavily*] D'you mean you're tired of me?

SYDNEY. That would be putting it crudely.

KIT. What's got into you? I don't know you.

SYDNEY. P'raps you're beginning to.

KIT. But what have I done?

SYDNEY. [*Flaring effectively*] Well, for one thing you shouldn't have told your father we were engaged. What girl, do you suppose, would stand it? You ask Alice.

KIT. [*Flaring in reality*] If you're not jolly careful I will.

SYDNEY. [*Egging him on*] Good for you!

KIT. [*Furious*] And if I do I'll ask her more than that.

SYDNEY. [*Clapping her hands*] I should go and do it now, if I were you. Strike while the iron's hot.

KIT. You're mad.

SYDNEY. [*With intense bitterness*] Yes, I suppose that's the right word to fling at me.

KIT. [*Between injury and distress*] I never meant that. You're twisting the words in my mouth. You're just picking a quarrel.

SYDNEY. [*Lazily*] Well, what's one to do with a little boy who won't take his medicine? I tried to give it you in jam.

KIT. [*Curt*] You want me to go?

SYDNEY. Yes.

KIT. For good?

SYDNEY. Yes.

KIT. Honest?

SYDNEY. Yes.

KIT. Right. [*He turns from her and goes out.*]

MARGARET. [*Looking up*] Was that Kit? Sydney, don't let him go.

SYDNEY. Kit! Ki-it!

KIT. [*Returning joyfully*] Yes! Yes, old thing?

SYDNEY. [*Impassively*] Mother wants you.

MARGARET, Oh, Kit—would you take this for me? It's for Mr. Meredith. I expect you'll meet him, but if not, I want you to take it on. At once, Kit.

Kit. Right, Mrs. Fairfield!

MARGARET. [*Detaining him*] What's the matter, Kit?

KIT. [*His head up*] Nothing, Mrs. Fairfield.

SYDNEY. Mother, Kit's got to go.

KIT. [*Resentfully*] It's all right. I'm going. You needn't worry.

MARGARET. [*Humorously, washing her hands of them*] Oh, you two!

She turns away from them and stands, her arm on the mantel-piece, staring into the fire. KIT *marches to the door.*

SYDNEY. [*In spite of herself, softly*] Kit!

KIT. [*Quickly*] Yes?

SYDNEY. [*Recovering herself, impishly*] You'll give her my love?

KIT. You're a beast, Sydney Fairfield! [*He goes out with a slam.*]

SYDNEY. [*In a changed voice*] You'll give her *my* love, [*Running to the door.*] Kit! [*The door opens again, but it is* GRAY MEREDITH *who comes in.*]

GRAY. Sydney, what's wrong with Kit? He went past me like a gust of wind.

MARGARET. [*Coming up to them*] He didn't give you my note?

GRAY. He never looked at me. What note?

MARGARET. I—

GRAY. Aren't you ready? Why aren't you dressed?

MARGARET. I—

GRAY. You must be quick, dearest.

MARGARET. I— [*She sways where she stands.*]

> GRAY *goes to her, and half clinging to him, half repulsing him, she sits down with her arm on the table and her head on her arm.*

GRAY. Of course! Worn out! You should have come an hour ago.

MARGARET. Yes.

GRAY. Never mind that now. Sydney, get your mother's wraps.

MARGARET. [*Agitated*] Sydney—wait—no.

GRAY. Warm things. It's bitter, driving.

SYDNEY. [*Uncertainly*] Gray, I think—

GRAY. Get them, please.

After a tiny pause and look at him SYDNEY *obeys. You see her go upstairs and disappear along the gallery.*

GRAY. [*Solicitous*] I was afraid it would come hard on you. Has he—? But you can tell me all that later.

MARGARET. I must tell it you now.

GRAY. Be quick, then. We've got a fifty mile drive before us.

MARGARET. [*Not looking at him*] I—I'm not coming.

GRAY. [*Smiling*] Not? There, sit quiet a moment. My dear—my dear heart—you're all to pieces.

MARGARET. I'm not coming.

GRAY. [*Checking what he takes for hysteria*] Margaret—Margaret—

MARGARET. I'm not coming. It's Hilary.

GRAY. What? Collapsed again? I thought as much.

MARGARET. I—

GRAY. Tragic! But—it simplifies his problem, poor devil. Has Alliot charge of him?

MARGARET. No, no. It's not that. He's not ill. He's well. That's it. He's well—and—he won't let me go.

GRAY. He won't, won't he? [*He turns from her.*]

MARGARET. Where are you going?

GRAY. To settle this matter. Where is he?

MARGARET. Leave him alone. It's me you must punish. I've made up my mind. Oh, how am I to tell you? He convinced me. He—cried, Gray. [*Then, as* GRAY *makes a quick gesture*] You mustn't sneer. You must understand. He's so unhappy. And there's Sydney to think of. And Gray, he won't marry us.

GRAY. What's that?

MARGARET. The Rector. He's been here.

GRAY. [*Furious*] My God, why wasn't I?

MARGARET. And Aunt Hester—she made it worse. [*Despairingly*] You see what it is—they all think I'm wicked.

GRAY. Damned insolence!

MARGARET. But it's not them—it's Hilary. I did fight them. I can't fight Hilary. I see it. It's my own fault. I ought never to have let myself care for you.

GRAY. Talk sense.

MARGARET. But there it is. It's too much for me. I've got to stay with him.

GRAY. [*For the first time taking her seriously*] Say that again, Margaret, if you dare—

MARGARET. I've got to—stay— [*With a sharp crying note in her voice*] Gray, Gray, don't look at me like that!

He turns abruptly away from her and walks across to the hearth. He stands a moment, deep in thought, takes out and lights a cigarette, realises what he is doing, and

with an exclamation flings it into the fire. Then he comes to MARGARET, *who has not moved.*

GRAY. [*Very quietly*] This—this is rather an extraordinary statement, isn't it?

MARGARET. [*Shrinking*] Don't use—that tone.

GRAY. I am being as patient as I can. But—it's not easy.

MARGARET. Easy— ?

GRAY. Do you mind telling me exactly what you mean?

MARGARET. I can't talk. You know I'm not clever. I'm trying to do what's right—

GRAY. Then shall I tell you?

MARGARET *makes a little quick movement with her hands, but she says nothing.*

GRAY. [*Watching her keenly while he speaks*] You mean that you've made a mistake—

MARGARET. [*Misunderstanding*] Yes.

GRAY, —that the last five years goes for nothing—that you don't care for me.

MARGARET. Gray!

GRAY. Wait. That you've never cared for me—that you don't want to marry me—

MARGARET. How can you say these things to me?

GRAY. But aren't they true?

MARGARET. You know—you know they're not true.

GRAY. Then what do you mean when you say, "I won't come?"

MARGARET. I mean—Hilary. I've got to put him first because—because he's weak. You—you're strong.

GRAY. Not strong enough to do without my birthright. I want my wife and my children. I've waited a long while for you. Now you must come.

SYDNEY *comes down the stairs, a red furred cloak over her arm. She pauses a few steps from the bottom, afraid to break in on them.*

MARGARET. If Hilary's left alone he'll go mad again.

GRAY. Margaret—come.

MARGARET. How can I?

GRAY. Margaret, my own heart—come.

MARGARET. You oughtn't to torture me. I've got to do what's right.

GRAY. [*Darkening*] Are you coming with me? I shan't ask it again.

MARGARET. Oh, God—You hear him! What am I to do?

SYDNEY *comes down another step.*

GRAY. Why, you're to do as you choose. I shan't force you. I'm not your turn-key. I'm not your beggar. We're free people, you and I. It's for you to say if you'll keep your—conscience, do you call it?—and lose—

MARGARET. I've lost what I love. There's no more to lose.

GRAY. You sing as sweetly as a toy nightingale. Almost I'd think you were real.

MARGARET. [*Wounded*] I don't know what you mean.

GRAY. "What you love!" You don't know the meaning of the notes you use.

MARGARET. [*Very white, but her voice is steady*] Don't deceive yourself. I love you. I ache and faint for you. I starve—

SYDNEY. [*Appalled, whispering*] What is it? I don't know her.

MARGARET. I'm withering without you like cut grass in the sun. I love you. I love you. Can't you see how it is with me? But—

GRAY. There's no "but" in love.

MARGARET. What is it in me? There's a thing I can't do. I can't see such pain.

GRAY. [*Hoarsely*] Do you think *I* can't suffer?

MARGARET I *am* you. But he—he's so defenceless. It's vivisection—like cutting a dumb beast about to make me well. I can't do it. I'd rather die of my cancer.

GRAY. [*The storm breaking*] Die then—you fool—you fool!

SYDNEY *descends another step. The cloak slides from her hands on to the baluster.*

GRAY [*Without expression*] Good-bye.

MARGARET. [*Blindly*] Forgive—

GRAY. How can I?

MARGARET. I would you—

GRAY. D'you think I bear you malice? It's not I. Why, to deny me, that's a little thing. I'll not go under because you're faithless. But what you're doing is the sin without forgiveness. You're denying—not me—but life. You're denying the spirit of life. You're denying—you're denying your mate.

SDYNEY. [*Strung up to breaking point*] Mother, you shall not.

MARGARET. [*As they both turn*] Sydney!

SYDNEY. [*Coming down to them*] I tell you—I tell you, you shall not.

MARGARET. [*Sitting down, with a listless gesture*] I must. There's no way out.

SYDNEY. There is. For *you* there is. I've thought it all along, and now I know. Father—he's my job, not yours.

MARGARET. [*With a last flicker of passion*] D'you think I'll make a scape-goat of my own child?

SYDNEY. [*Sternly*] Can you help it? I'm his child. [*She throws herself down beside her*] Mother! Mother darling, don't you see? You're no good to him. You're scared of him. But I'm his own flesh and blood. I know how he feels. I'll make him happier than you can. Be glad for me. Be glad I'm wanted somewhere.

MARGARET. [*Struggling against the hope that is flooding her*] But Kit, Sydney—Kit?

SYDNEY. [*With a queer little laugh that ends, though it does not begin, quite naturally*] Bless him, I'll be dancing at his wedding in six months.

MARGARET. But all you ought to have—

SYDNEY. [*Jumping up flippantly*] Oh, I'm off getting married. I'm going to have a career.

MARGARET. —the love—the children—

SYDNEY. [*Strained*] No children for me, Mother. No children for me. I've lost my chance for ever.

MARGARET. [*Weakly*] No—no—

SYDNEY. *Smiling down at her*] But you—you take it. I give it to you.

MARGARET. But—

SYDNEY. [*Dominant*] What's the use of arguing? I've made up my mind.

MARGARET. But if your father—

SYDNEY. [*At the end of her endurance*] Go away, Mother. Go away quickly. This is my job, not yours. [*She turns abruptly from them to the window, and stands staring out into the darkening garden.*]

MARGARET. [*Dazed*] So—so— [*She sways, hesitating, unbelieving, like a bird at the open door of its cage*] So—I can come.

GRAY *makes no answer.*

MARGARET. [*With a new full note in her voice*] Gray, I can come.

GRAY. [*Without moving*] Can you, Margaret?

MARGARET. [*In heaven*] I can come.

GRAY. [*Impassively*] Are you sure?

MARGARET. [*In quick alarm*] What do you mean?

GRAY. [*Stonily*] Why, you could deny me. You've chopped and changed. I want proof that you've still a right to come.

MARGARET. [*Like a child*] You're angry with me?

GRAY. No.

MARGARET. You're angry with me.

GRAY. I want proof.

MARGARET. I get frightened. I'm made so. Always I've been afraid—of Hilary—of everyone—of life. But now—you—you're angry, you're so angry, you're very angry with me—and I— [*She goes steadily across the room to him. He makes no movement*] I'm not afraid. [*She puts up her hands, and drawing him down to her kisses him on the mouth.*] Is that proof?

GRAY. [*Quietly*] Proof enough. Come.

He takes the cloak and throws it round her. They go out together. As SYDNEY, *forgotten, stands looking after them,* BASSETT *enters with the tea-tray. She puts it down on the table and turns up the lights.*

BASSETT. Is the gentleman staying to tea, miss?

SYDNEY. [*Correcting her*] Mr. Fairfield. It's my father, Bassett.

BASSETT. We thought so, miss?

SYDNEY. [*Smiling faintly*] Did you, Bassett?

BASSETT. He's got your way, miss! Quick-like! [*She opens the drawing-room door*] Tea's ready, ma'am. [*Outside the motor drives away.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Entering with* HILARY] Tea's very late. [BASSETT *goes out.*]

HILARY. I thought I heard the sound of a car. [*Suspiciously*] Where's your mother?

SYDNEY. She's gone away.

HILARY. [*Stricken*] Gone?

SYDNEY. Gone away for good.

HILARY. Where?

SYDNEY. Out of our lives.

HILARY. With— ?

SYDNEY. [*Quickly*] Out of our lives.

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Furiously*] This is your doing, Sydney.

HILARY. [*Dazed*] Gone. Everything gone.

SYDNEY. I'm not gone.

HILARY. But that boy— ?

SYDNEY. That's done with.

MISS FAIRFIELD. You've jilted him?

SYDNEY. Yes.

MISS FAIRFIELD. Like mother, like daughter.

SYDNEY. Just so.

MISS FAIRFIELD. I pray you get your punishment.

SYDNEY. Your prayers will surely be answered, Auntie.

HILARY. [*Slowly*] It was a cruel thing to do.

SYDNEY. He'll get over it. Men—they're not like us.

HILARY. [*Timidly*] You loved him?

SYDNEY. What's that to anyone but me?

HILARY. [*Peering at her*] You're crying.

SYDNEY. I'm not.

HILRAY. You love him?

SYDNEY. I suppose so.

HILARY. Then why? Then why?

SYDNEY. We're in the same boat, Father.

MISS FAIRFIELD. Yes, that's the way they talk now, Hilary. They know too much, the young women. It upsets everything.

HILARY *sits down on the sofa.*

HILARY. [*Broken*] I don't see ahead. I don't see what's to become of me. There's no-one.

SYDNEY. There's me.

HILARY. [*Not looking at her*] I should think you hate me.

SYDNEY. I need you just as badly as you need me.

HILARY. [*Fiercely*] It's your damn-clever doing that she went. D'you think I can't hate you?

SYDNEY. [*Close to him*] No, no, Father, you want me too much. We'll make a good job of it yet.

HILARY. [*His head in his hands*] What job?

SYDNEY. [*Petting him, coaxing him, loving him, her hands quieting his twitching hands, her strong will already controlling him*] Living. I've got such plans already, Father—Father dear. We'll do things. We'll have a good time somehow, you and I—you and I. Did you know you'd got a clever

daughter? Writing—painting—acting! We'll go on tour together. We'll make a lot of money. We'll have a cottage somewhere. You see, I'll make it up to you. I'll make you proud of me.

MISS FAIRFIELD. [*Surveying them*] Proud of her! D'you see, Hilary? That's all she thinks of—self—self—self! Money, ambition—and sends that poor boy away. A parson's son! Not good enough for her, that's what it is. She's like the rest of the young women. Hard as nails! Hard as nails!

SYDNEY. [*Crying out*] Don't you listen to her, Father! Father, don't believe her! I'm not hard. I'm not hard.

His arm goes round her with a gesture, awkward, timid, yet fatherly.

THE CURTAIN FALLS.

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